

5

Author

Fudeorca

Illustration

toi8

The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts two characters with pointed ears, likely elves or dwarves, in a rustic, stone-walled interior. On the left, a young man with dark, spiky hair and blue eyes sits, holding a woven basket. He wears a light-colored, button-down shirt. On the right, a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes stands, looking towards the viewer with a surprised expression. She wears a light-colored, button-down shirt and a dark skirt with a gold belt. The background shows stone walls and a window with orange triangular patterns.



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The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts two characters with pointed ears, likely elves, in a rustic, stone-walled interior. On the right, a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and large, expressive blue eyes looks upwards with a surprised or excited expression. She wears a light-colored, button-up tunic. On the left, a young man with short, dark, spiky hair and blue eyes looks towards the viewer with a gentle smile. He is wearing a similar light-colored tunic. In the foreground, a woven basket sits on a surface. The background shows stone walls and some orange-colored triangular decorations.

Characters



YURI HO

Eldest son of the Ho family—one of the Shiyalta Kingdom's chieftain families. While studying at the Knight Academy, he founded Ho Company. Having foreseen the downfall of the kingdom, he's trying to locate a new continent. He has past-life memories of living in modern-day Japan.



CAROL FLUE SHALTL

A princess of the Shiyalta Kingdom raised to become the future queen. She attends both the Knight Academy and the Cultural Academy. She's prideful, but lacks worldly experience. Her beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes are evidence of her royal heritage.



MYALO GUDINVEIL

A girl who studies at the Knight Academy despite being the eldest daughter from a witch family. She is loyal to Yuri and serves him like a staff officer.



SHAM HO

Yuri's cousin and a student of the Cultural Academy. Despite her genius intellect, she struggles with social interaction.



LILLY AMIAN

A senior Cultural Academy student who shares a dorm room with Sham. She's a skilled engineer and often makes devices at Yuri's request.



ROOK HO

Yuri's father. He used to manage a ranch until he succeeded his brother to become ruler of Ho Province.



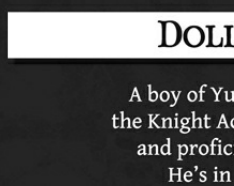
SUZUYA HO

Yuri's mother. She was born to a farming family and has a gentle manner that conceals her strong will.



ETHER WICHITA

A Kulati woman who fled her country after being branded a heretic. She teaches Kulatish language classes.



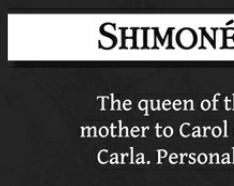
DOLLA GODWIN

A boy of Yuri's age who attends the Knight Academy. He's heavyset and proficient in martial arts. He's in love with Carol.



CAPH ORNETTE

The president of Ho Company. Yuri pulled him out of his former state of decline.



SHIMONÉ FLUE SHALTL

The queen of the Shiyalta Kingdom and mother to Carol and Carol's younger sister, Carla. Personality-wise, she's laid-back.

The Story So Far

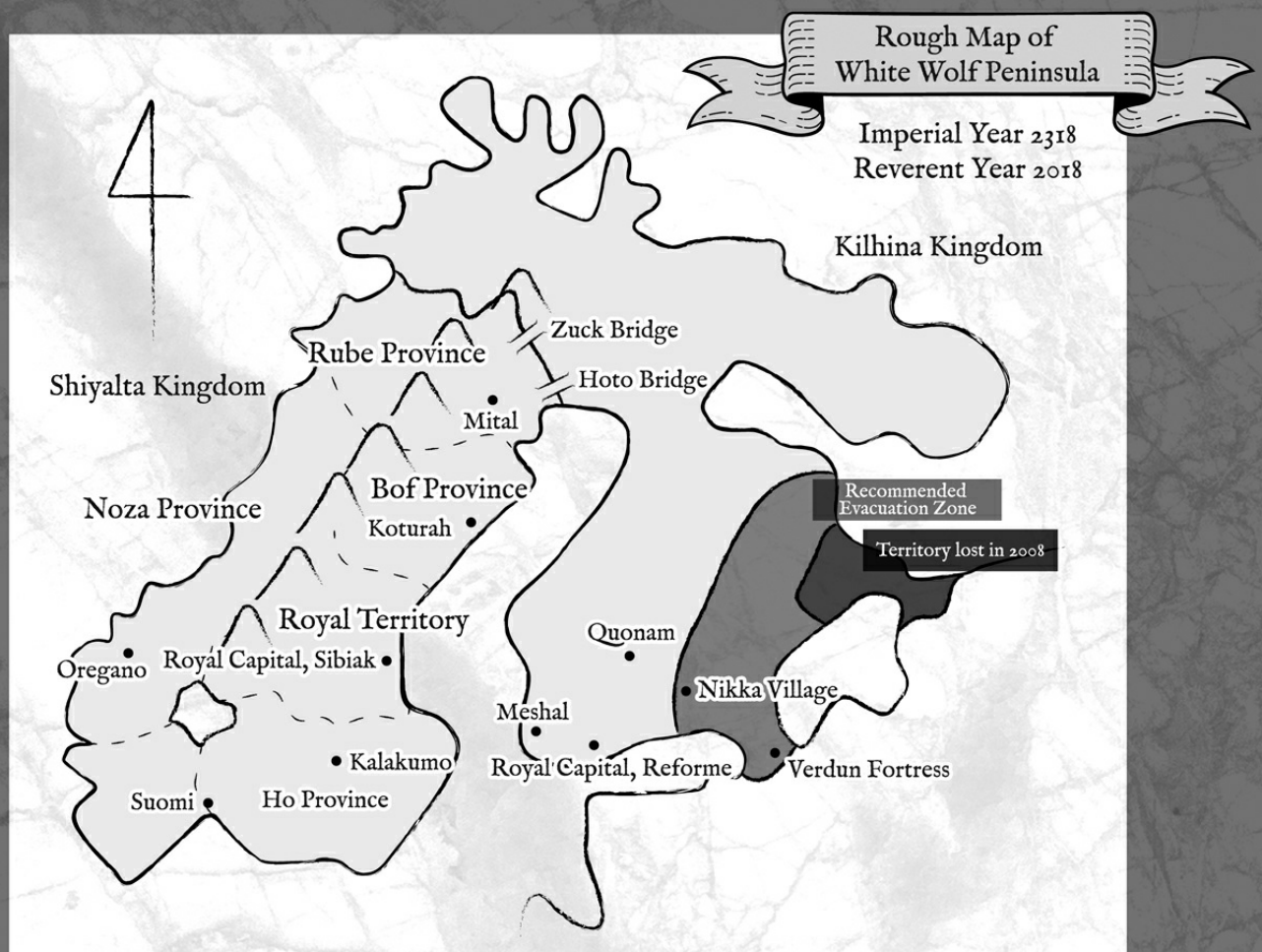
The world is inhabited by two types of humans—the Shanti and the Kulati—that are locked in a battle for survival. Invaders from Kulati nations—who’ve branded the Shanti as demons—have left only two Shanti kingdoms standing, both of which are on White Wolf Peninsula.

In one of those kingdoms, the Shiyalta Kingdom, a boy named Yuri was born to a chieftain family. Having realized that the place he calls home won’t persist for much longer, he started a business known as Ho Company while also studying at the Knight Academy to prepare himself for his responsibilities as heir to the Ho family headship.

Using memories of his past-life spent in modern-day Japan, he developed a system for celestial navigation and is searching for a new continent while conducting trade with foreign nations.

In the other Shanti kingdom, the Kilhina Kingdom, Kulati crusaders have begun a new invasion.

Yuri was leading an observation unit formed of Knight Academy students to the frontlines where they could witness the fighting, but after an attack caused him to crash along with Princess Carol, the pair appear to have been left behind on the battlefield.



C O N T E N T S

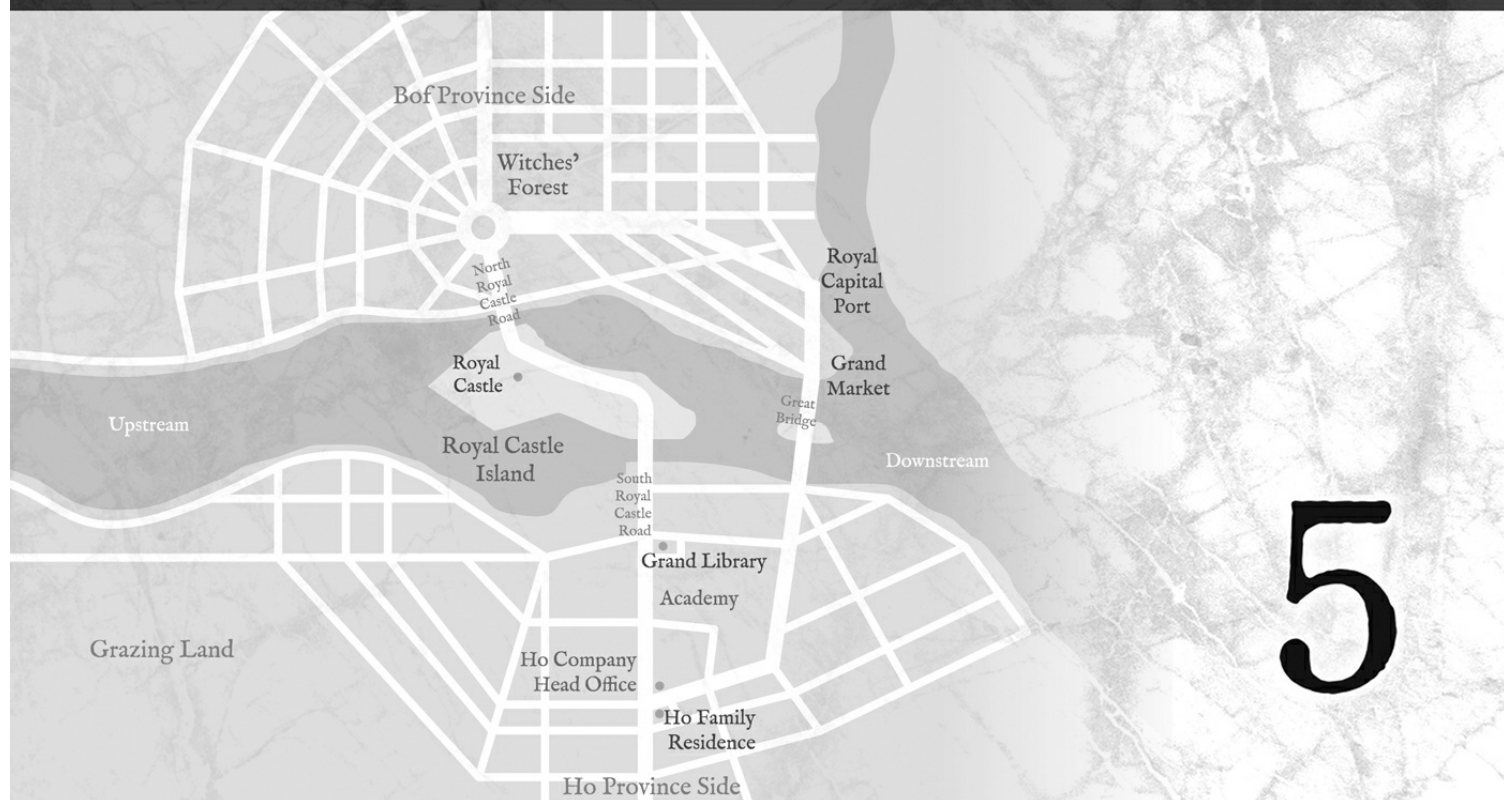
Chapter 1 ➤ In the Forest _____

Chapter 2 ➤ In a Dying City _____

Chapter 3 ➤ The Battle of Ort River _____

Interlude ➤ Ange's March _____

Epilogue ➤ Meanwhile in White Birch Dormitory —



Chapter 1 — In the Forest

I

“I love you,” Carol said.

The bonfire had gone out, and I felt something wet against my cheek in the darkness.

“Hm?!”

“Mh...” She kissed my cheek several times.

“Hey...” Though I didn’t push her away, I couldn’t help but sound bewildered.

“Don’t you like it?” Carol whispered in my ear.

“What are you doing? This isn’t like you.”

“Answer the question. Don’t you like it?” Carol’s voice had a warm and seductive quality.

“I...don’t mind it.”

“Okay.”

With that, Carol kissed my cheek once more. This time she got close enough to touch the edge of my mouth with her tongue before she moved away.

“This is how I feel,” she said.

“I might be dense, but yeah, I guessed that much.”

Even *I’d* noticed that Carol liked me, but it didn’t feel like love. I got the impression that the hostility she’d felt toward me as a young child soon after entering the academy had gradually become curiosity, which in turn had developed into affection.

“If you just want to thank me for saving you...” I began.

“No. I...I live life the way I want to, but I make sure I’m not bothering people.

That's why I checked."

She just wants to check she's not bothering me? I guess if I already had a lover or a fiancée, she'd be making me pretty uncomfortable.

"If it's not bothering you, then just let me do it."

"I don't mind..."

"All right."

"But I don't want to do anything if I can't handle the consequences."

If she was some stranger, that would be one thing, but this was Carol.

"Consequences? Who cares?"

You know it's not that simple.

"I'm a man. If I kiss you back, I'll start wanting more."

I hadn't ejaculated in almost a month, and multiple bloody encounters had worn me down. To kill people, I had to follow my aggressive impulses, and that animalistic side of me could influence my sexual urges. I was trying to be a gentleman in front of Carol, but I had no idea what I might do if I were to drop the facade.

"I don't care," she said.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that I don't want to be your husband."

I had to make that clear.

"I don't care about that," was Carol's instant response, as if she'd anticipated what I'd say.

She really doesn't care?

"But you should," I argued.

"I won't ask you to do the responsible thing and marry me. It can just be something we did on a whim one night, then forgot about. I won't even complain if you sleep with other women."

I couldn't believe those words were coming out of *Carol's* mouth. Her attitudes toward sex were strict, and she never messed around with boys. Every

line she spoke was more surprising than the last.

“It’s not that simple...”

“Yes it is. You don’t have to worry about future problems. You can just follow your heart.”

I couldn’t change Carol’s thinking. Maybe it was an absurd thing to worry about in a situation like this, but I had to wonder about the possibility of getting her pregnant.

“I can’t just use you like none of it means anything. I’ve already told you that you’re precious to me.”

My stiff attitude seemed to make Carol a little less determined, but her hesitation only lasted for a moment.

“You know,” Carol continued, “you said you only saved me because you wanted to. Now I’m only doing this because I want to. I want us to share our feelings—that’s all it is. If you don’t mind, then I’d prefer it if you’d just let me. It’s what I want. What I mean is...” Carol seemed to be choosing her words carefully. She must’ve wanted to make her feelings clear without being confusing or inconsistent. “If you just use me, that’ll make me happier than if you push me away like you’re doing.”

Her voice was full of emotion. The extreme situation we were in was enough to make her behave strangely, but I knew her feelings toward me were genuine—that much was clear from what she’d said. Although it was like a drunken confession, she was being driven by feelings that she’d held all along.

I held Carol’s body with both my hands and brought my lips to hers. As I drew my face away, Carol wrapped her arms around my neck, then pressed her lips against mine once more.

“Ngh...!”

In my excitement, my body had grown hot and my brain was boiling.

“Ngh... Ah, hah, haaah...” Carol’s breathing was rough, and even the air she exhaled was sensual.

We both wanted it, but I mustered up every rational fiber of my brain to suppress my bestial impulses.

“That’s enough for today,” I said.

“Ah... Why?”

“It’s your first time, right?”

“Of course. Yours too, right?”

“Mine too.” I hadn’t done this sort of thing once since my rebirth, so it wasn’t a total lie. “If it’s a first for both of us, then we might have various problems. We really shouldn’t do it here in the middle of a cold dark forest.”

“We’re warm enough.”

She was right—our bodies had grown hot in our excitement to the point that made it hard to believe we were still outside.

“Maybe, but it’s hard to be gentle with you when it’s so dark. And we’re both filthy... There’s too much wrong with this.”

“Uh... I smell?”

You kinda do.

Carol couldn’t easily bathe in streams because of her injury, and I’d worried that bathing in an icy stream would rob me of my strength.

“We both do. Anyway, we don’t have to rush things.”

“Ngh... Gah...” Rather than form words, Carol simply groaned. “Okay. Not today.”

Carol removed her arms from my neck, then she turned around and rested her back against my chest.

Our activities had torn the poncho a little around the neck.



I had a dream; I knew it was a dream right away.

Everyone I saw was wearing Japanese clothing, and they all spoke Japanese. They were walking around in a town with buildings made from timber and

plaster. It was like I was in a period drama.

It had occurred to me that a place like this might exist on this new Earth, possibly somewhere in the far east. It was like seeing my own desires brought to life.

I joined the crowd of people marching down the street. It was spring, and I could see a castle in the distance. The castle wasn't made from stone—rather, it had black roof tiles and walls coated in plain white plaster.

I headed down the main street of a shopping district. There were lines of stores to my left and right, each with traditional fabric partitions hanging over the entrance, and with the store's name written in a familiar writing system.

This really takes me back. Maybe this place exists over in the far east. I should go there.

Like a migratory bird driven by its homing instinct, I couldn't help but consider it. Ultimately, however, I rejected the idea. This world wasn't like the world I'd known originally. Even if it had a place like Japan, it wouldn't be *the* Japan I knew.

This world had no Roman Empire and no Mongol Empire. There might've been an island shaped like Japan, but it wouldn't actually *be* Japan. I'd reminded myself of this fact many times.

I woke up and opened my eyes. The sun had already risen, lighting up my surroundings.

I blinked a few times as I stretched my neck—it had grown stiff from resting against a hard tree. I couldn't feel the poncho's hood against my hair or ears—someone had taken it off me.

Carol? I wondered. But she was still there, sleeping against my chest.

Growing suspicious, I opened my eyes wider and saw something moving fast.

That'll hit me!

Before I could think about how to react, I instinctively moved my head, like someone dodging a ball flying at their face. My neck muscles had contracted

without any conscious thought, throwing my head to the side. *Thud!* The sound rang out beside my ear.

It wasn't a ball that had flown at me, or a bird for that matter.

A sword made from polished steel glinted right next to my ear. It would've been embedded in my face if I hadn't dodged, but now it was stuck in the tree where I'd rested my head.

Nngh?

My brain had been enjoying the peace of sleep, but now that I was coming to my senses, it felt like I had been abruptly dropped into a battle. The pleasant dream that had filled my thoughts had been substituted by this new reality.

I threw my body sideways to distance myself from the blade.

The poncho split open vertically at the tear caused by last night's fumbling. A single roll was enough to completely free me from it.

The rough treatment caused Carol to wake up and open her eyes. "Ngh? What?!"

I looked about me, trying to ascertain the situation, and soon spotted Canka.

"Wha—?!"

Carol noticed our enemy and reached for her dagger just like we'd been trained, but Canka grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Ugh..."

He grabbed her wrist and twisted it, causing her to drop the dagger to the ground. I'd seen enough of his skill with a sword to know how strong his grip would be. I couldn't blame Carol for letting go so easily.

In fact, I was relieved to see her drop the weapon. I'd feared he'd kill her for resisting.

"Long time no see," I said while paying attention to our surroundings.

I couldn't sense the presence of any nearby enemies besides Canka, but they could've been waiting a short distance away.

Being unable to fully understand our situation filled me with anxiety. The

stimulation to my brain felt like a torrent that had completely washed away the comfort of the dream.

My left foot soon became the main focus of my concerns. Adrenaline must've taken effect. I found I could flex my toes and even put weight on my injured foot without the pain becoming unbearable. I could stand, and might even be capable of rushing at him, as long as we were close.

That meant archers were my biggest concern. Fearing being shot from behind, I slowly began moving so I could position myself with a tree to my back.

I could keep track of what was happening to my left and right to some extent, but I couldn't turn around to look behind me. That would leave me fatally exposed against such a strong opponent.

I had to think carefully and remain alert. With this in mind, I felt like I was getting a handle on the situation.

"Put the weapon down," Canka commanded.

As he spoke, he retrieved his sword from the tree trunk. Carol was sitting on the ground in front of him, and he turned his blade sideways before resting it on her shoulder.

He'd gathered the pieces of his armor at some point. His arms, legs, torso, and head were all covered by metal plates...with the exception of the face guard. I'd completely destroyed the parts attaching it to the helmet.

Canka had wrapped cloth around the exposed part of his face. It was thick fabric, perhaps from someone's pants, but it was so red that it seemed the blood had soaked completely through and would soon begin to drip.

His nose had cartilage rather than muscle, which made the deep cut I'd given him earlier difficult to sew up. It was tricky to even bandage a wound like that effectively because of the shape of the nose. I could tell that he'd struggled with it.

"I'll say it once more—put the weapon down."

I heard you the first time...

"Your name's Canka, right? You're good." He really was. It was cause for

frustration. “You spent all night tracking us, didn’t you? I’m guessing you found footprints by torchlight. Most people couldn’t do it, no matter how badly they wanted payback. You’re skilled, and smart too.”

Many would consider seeking revenge, but few would actually do it. His unit had been almost entirely annihilated, everything he’d brought had been burned, and he’d been heavily wounded in our last fight to top it off. An ordinary person’s determination wouldn’t be enough to see them through—they’d lose hope. It required a highly disciplined body and mind.

“You must think I’m here to talk,” Canka said. “I’m not. Put the weapon down and I won’t kill her.”

He was a poor actor. His threat sounded hollow.

“You followed me all night, expecting to find me sleeping alone, but you found two of us. Then, when you lowered the hood, you discovered a beautiful girl with blonde hair. I know I’m the only one you’re willing to kill.”

When Canka had lowered the hood, Carol’s head must’ve been in front of mine. It was safe to say that if Carol’s hair had been black, my time in this world would’ve already been over. He would’ve driven his sword through her stomach without a second thought, skewering us both and sending us to the next life together. It would’ve been easy. Instead, his initial attack had targeted me specifically and avoided Carol. I’d noticed him because he’d hesitated for a moment in order to aim. He’d wanted to strike at my head only, but it had been behind Carol’s.

“Just drop the weapon,” Canka said for the fourth time.

“You can’t do it,” I declared, talking over him. I knew he couldn’t.

“Carol, pass me that spear,” I said in Shanish.

Carol couldn’t understand a word that Canka and I had been saying. Like Myalo had once said, to her it would be like listening to an octopus speak.

“You’re...sure?” she asked.

“Trust me.”

Carol grabbed the sheathed spear beside her and threw it toward me. I

crouched a little to pick it up, removed the sheath, then put away my dagger.

Canka had reached out his hand in an attempt to stop her from throwing the spear, but nothing more. The smallest movement of his sword would've dealt a fatal wound to Carol's neck, but he hadn't done it.

"You're smart," I told him. "I know it sounds odd, but that's why I trust you. I'd have a much harder time dealing with an uneducated peasant soldier."

Canka was silent.

"She's worth more than her weight in gold, but she's no good to you as a corpse. I know you're not stupid enough to kill her over a threat, or as revenge. They're empty words."

In response, Canka moved his sword and put the blade to Carol's cheek.

"Maybe I can't kill her, but I can hurt her."

Ah...

"If she's going to keep someone's bed warm, then you'd better not wound her face. Even city whores are cheaper if their face is scarred. You know that. If you hurt her, you're hurting yourself."

It would be a stupid move, like deliberately breaking a large gem into smaller pieces.

"You sure about that?" Canka asked. "If I make a permanent scar, it'll ruin her life."

"I don't care," I replied.

If I was killed and Carol was captured, she'd live life as someone's possession in the Kulati world. It was ridiculous to suggest that she'd be better off that way. It might've been another story if she were the type of woman who couldn't bear to be seen in public with a scarred face and contemplated killing herself over it...but Carol wasn't like that.

"Liar. You've been carrying this crippled girl the whole time, haven't you? You can't pretend you don't care about her after doing so much for her."

That was reasonable. He'd seen how fast I could move during our fight the

day before. My slow pace must've been a mystery to him until now. Now, with a little thought, he must've figured it out.

"As long as you don't kill her, I don't care. And I know you won't."

"You sure? It'll ruin her entire life."

Oh, I see how it is. He doesn't understand it because women barely have any rights in his country. No wonder it feels like we're on different wavelengths.

"No it won't—I'm going to marry her," I lied.

"What?"

"We're going to get married the moment we get home. I won't change my mind over a wound on her face. I'll admit, we'll be sad about it, but we'll overcome it as husband and wife."

"Grr..." Canka gritted his teeth, though I couldn't tell if it was from frustration or something else—the blood-soaked cloth he'd tied around his face made his expression difficult to read.

"If that woman was worthless to you, you'd kill her," I said. "It'd be worth it to deal me a psychological blow. But I know just how much value you see in that blonde hair and those blue eyes. So when you tell me you'll kill her or cut her face unless I lie down and die, it's obvious that you're making empty threats."

Canka didn't contradict me.

"But I am worried your hand might slip—that's why I'm not attacking you. So it's up to you to make the next move. How long are we going to be here? If you want my advice, you'd better give up on the hostage plan and turn your sword on me."

My foot had been sewn up well enough to slow the bleeding, and the wound wasn't exposed. Although we were both injured, there was a big difference in the quality of the treatment we'd gotten.

It was no use for him to delay any further because he was losing strength faster than me.

"I don't think so," he replied. "You'll have the advantage."

What advantage?

“You mean because I’ve eaten and rested while you were up all night and losing blood?”

“Yeah...”

I thought he’d have a clever excuse, but no—he simply admitted that he’d lose.

“Haven’t you realized? My foot’s badly hurt.”

I lifted my left foot a little and showed him the sole. The end of my shoe was still missing, so the only thing that covered my toes were the bandages. I knew there’d be a dark stain where I’d bled from the sewn-up wound.

“Thanks to you cutting away part of my shoe, I ended up stepping on some shrapnel. If I hadn’t, I would’ve chased you down and finished you off yesterday. Didn’t you wonder why I let you go?”

Canka had probably felt that I’d given up chasing him all too easily. It was only because he was so sure I’d give chase that he’d thrown away his precious armor in order to flee faster. No one would throw away their gear like that if they didn’t expect a pursuit.

“I can’t put my weight on this foot. Unfortunately, that means I can’t fight like I did yesterday. You can see how bad the bleeding is. Looking at it objectively, I’d say we have an equal chance at winning.”

I didn’t mention that *my* injury had been carefully sewn up by Carol, since Canka would think he’d be at a major disadvantage. If he thought that way, he’d do anything to avoid fighting me.

“On top of that, you’re holding a superior weapon. I got you on the nose back when you were distracted by the explosion, but that won’t happen twice...even if I am a little better equipped this time,” I added, shifting my grip on the spear as I spoke.

It was the spear I’d cut in half, reducing it to just a meter in length. It didn’t have much more reach than a sword, but it was still far better than using the dagger. My weapon’s lack of range had given me trouble in our last fight. I

couldn't face him with a dagger again.

"Don't just stand there," I said. "Let's do it."

"You're right..."

Canka grabbed Carol's collar and cast her away like a rock.

"Nh!" Carol was clearly trying hard not to shriek. She'd been thrown violently, after all.

"You'd better warn your woman not to get in our way."

"I should?"

"As much as I want riches and glory, I won't die for it. I'll turn my sword on her the instant she tries to grab my legs. That'll be bad for you and me both."

That sounded entirely possible.

"Carol, he says he'll kill you if you get involved. Go hide behind a tree."

"Okay..."

"I've told her," I informed Canka. "Now let's do this."

"All right" was all he said before gripping his sword in both hands. Canka approached me casually until we were within reach of each other, then readied his weapon. He swung his sword toward me and grunted, "Ugh!"

He was too far away to hit me. I knew he wasn't aiming for my body—he was trying to cut through the spear that I held before me.

I quickly moved the spear out of his sword's path as Canka followed it. While staying just out of my reach, he tried a few more swings.

To an observer, our fight likely didn't seem serious. It looked like we were just wildly swinging our weapons at each other while deliberately staying out of reach.

Then we grew further apart.

"I see." Now I knew what I was up against.

I'd trained against opponents with swords at the Knight Academy, but I had far more experience practicing against spears. To make matters worse, my

spear was half its usual length, so it felt like I had to relearn how to wield it.

For some reason, he spoke to me. “You’re calm.”

“Am I?” I replied. *I thought he wasn’t here to talk.*

“I’m trying to figure you out.”

“Hm?” *Where’s he going with this?*

“Maybe you’ve got a trick up your sleeve... But even then, it’s still fifty-fifty. You can’t be confident of winning.”

He was right. A rational analysis said that I was at a disadvantage because my foot was injured. My foot was vital for maneuverability. Canka’s injury might’ve made it harder for him to breathe through his nose, but that wasn’t a big handicap. It was also clear from his movements that he hadn’t lost enough blood to make him unsteady.

“True,” I replied.

“I can’t sense any fear from you. I know you don’t have a way out, but that doesn’t explain it.”

Apparently it was my fearlessness that bothered him. More to the point, he couldn’t understand how I could remain so composed rather than cowering or growing agitated. But it was just the type of person I was—I had no other way to explain it.

There was no point worrying about death or what might become of Carol after I died. I didn’t cower when placed in a situation that required me to fight with all I had; I actually enjoyed it to some extent. Now was the time to use everything I’d learned from those training drills. Whether I lived, died, or was left crippled after losing a limb in the fight would simply depend on what I’d learned from the academy.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with my head,” I said.

“You mean you’re insane?”

“Yeah. Just call me insane. Well...”

I almost told him that I’d be fine with it if he decided to give up and go home,

but the words didn't come out. I knew that I had to kill him. Yesterday, it would've been different. I would've cried tears of joy and thanked the heavens if he'd announced he was leaving. But now I had to kill him, even if it meant tracking him through the forest. He knew that Carol was with me.

If he ran off and informed his superiors about Carol, it wouldn't be another ten soldiers who came for us, it would be a hundred times as many, if not a thousand. Without knowing how much territory was under the enemy's control or how far their supply network extended, I wasn't sure whether they were capable of dispatching a large force deep into the forest. But given how weak our side had been in this war so far, it wouldn't surprise me if the enemy had that level of superiority here. After all, the enemy actually *had* sent a thousand soldiers after us. If they knew one of us was a blonde princess, that could easily turn into ten thousand.

"I think that's enough talk. We're fighting a war; let's not romanticize it."

"You're right," Canka agreed, raising his sword once more.

Even though I'd asked to resume fighting, I couldn't make the first move myself.

The spear in my hands was a good one. Smithing was one of the Rube family's fortes, and this was the weapon given to the family's heir as he headed out on his first campaign. I couldn't have asked for a better one. Still, I couldn't be sure whether it would penetrate Canka's metal armor. All of his easily targeted vital points—from his neck down to his abdomen—were shielded by metal plates, which were probably extra thick. The armor extended down like a skirt around his waist, hiding the joints at the top of his legs and preventing me from aiming for his balls.

If I were to drive the spear into his chest with all my might, would it break through the armor? It was possible. I felt certain that this spear, having been tempered by expert smiths, was far tougher than his gear.

Another problem was that the spear would merely graze the armor's surface if I hit at an angle. I'd have to drive the spear point perpendicularly into the metal plate, which would mean perfectly matching my attack with Canka's ever-changing movements in order to strike at the right angle. It was a feat I didn't

feel capable of.

On top of all that, plunging the spear into his chest or abdomen wouldn't kill him instantly. I'd have to get up close while driving the weapon into his body, which would result in us killing each other.

That left his face—which was still uncovered due to the missing face guard—as the best target. Canka was well aware of that, however. Since he knew exactly where I'd aim my attacks, he'd have no trouble defending against them.

Canka held his sword in front of him, with the tip almost pointing at me. In this stance, he had the sword angled just slightly to the side so that it obscured the arm he used to grip the sword near its hilt. It made it easy for him to defend the part of his body positioned furthest forward—the arm that controlled the sword.

I had my body turned sideways. Although our weapons were about the same length, the difference in stance gave me less reach. Canka held his sword with its entire length in front of his body, while my weapon was drawn back somewhat due to my side-on stance. I could've held my spear like he held his sword, but I didn't want to do that. Having wielded my weapon this way thousands of times before in training, it was deeply ingrained in me. I couldn't wield it with as much skill if I held it any other way.

"Here goes," he said. It felt like he was talking to himself, rather than me.

After that brief warning, Canka made his move. The tip of his sword shot up, and with a quick step forward, he swung it down at my wrist. When I pulled back the spear to avoid his attack, Canka continued his motion, rotating on his forward leg so that his back was presented to me.

I'd jumped back the moment I felt he was too close. I watched as he made a full turn before taking a stride toward me.

"Ngh!" With another large stride forward, he slashed his sword downward. Canka's two strides had carried him further than my leap backward—in other words, I was within his reach.

I can't dodge this.

I had to block with my spear. He aimed for the spear's shaft as I quickly drew

my weapon back.

Clang! There was the sound of metal hitting metal, and I felt a shock run through my arm. I'd slowed his blade just enough to give me time to move out of its path.

Canka didn't stop there—he swung at me again an instant later. I could hear his sword cut through the air as he changed its direction and swung it upward.

This time I was ready. I dodged his attack, along with the next two slashes that followed. He paused and repositioned his sword as if he was running out of breath.

That was close. And what was that spin? It caught me so off guard I almost got hit.

Large movements like that were rarely effective, but Canka had moved swiftly enough to make it useful. It was like he'd used some secret technique from his school of sword fighting.

I'd broken out in a cold sweat.

He readied his sword again, steadied his breathing, and gave me his analysis. "Looks like your foot really is injured. You're favoring the other leg."

He's still not done talking? Fine, I'll talk too.

"Yeah, and your armor's busted."

"You noticed?"

"Well, I was the one who bent it out of shape."

I'd tried to ruin Canka's discarded armor. Although I hadn't managed to damage the torso section, I'd smacked the arms against a tree while holding on to the finger parts. They hadn't *appeared* to be out of shape, but now I knew it had worked. They must've been warped around the elbow, because he was clearly having trouble bending and straightening his arms. The metal plates weren't scraping against each other badly enough for me to hear, but I could tell his movements grew awkward whenever his arms moved at the elbows.

It was made all the more clear when he fought strenuously. If his armor had been undamaged, his previous attack would've thrown me off-balance, leaving

me unable to block the attack that followed. I might've been dead. It was possible that he'd resorted to such drastic attacks because he feared his sword lacked the reach and sharpness to cut me down with an ordinary swing.

"You couldn't throw it away?" I taunted him. "What? You couldn't afford a new set?"

"It's a family heirloom. I'm poor."

"Are you?"

His lack of wealth was actually evident, given the construction of his gear. It was a crude set, certainly not something worth putting in a museum to show future generations. Such armor would more likely be melted down to make cheap knives and forks the moment it became a relic of the past.

He was certainly wealthier than a pauper, but maintaining a single set of armor was probably as much as his family could manage. That might've been the very reason he'd trained so hard with a sword. I could easily imagine it.

"Well, now I know your problems and you know mine," I said. "It's not so bad. It gives things a little flavor."

Given our relative strengths and the overall situation, I was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

I rotated the spear a half turn in my hands and looked at the damage it had just taken. The metal parts forming the spear's point extended deep into its shaft, creating a region that couldn't easily be cut in half. When I'd blocked Canka's attack a moment ago, it had been stopped by that metal core, leaving a deep scar in the surrounding wood of the shaft. Needless to say, it wasn't good for the spear's durability—it could easily snap in two now.

On top of that, my injury had gotten worse. I'd felt a shooting pain a moment ago after I'd landed hard on my left foot while retreating. Since that movement, I'd been able to sense warm blood seeping out from the wound. It had been torn open and was now bleeding. My condition would keep deteriorating for as long as we fought.

There was nothing but bad news.

“Well, there’s no point wasting time here. Let’s finish this,” I said as I resolved to keep fighting.

We’d gotten as far as we could by running, but there was no way out this time. The only option was to fight.

“Sure. Show me what you’ve got.”

“All right.” I nodded and readied my spear. Nothing had changed. I kept the point aimed at Canka as always. *Time to finish this*, I told myself.

I cleared my mind. It felt like the fog that clouded my vision was fading. Soim’s teachings resurfaced in the back of my mind: *Be the arrow notched in a bow drawn tight. Watch for the opportunity that comes. Seize it and strike like lightning.*

It was an odd feeling. Though I was motionless, I felt like I was ready to move faster than sound. My mind wasn’t empty; it was filled with clarity.

“Not gonna attack?” Canka asked.

I didn’t reply. My brain was no longer capable of conversation.

“Then I will,” he said.

Canka kept his sword pointed toward me as he took a small step forward, then jumped back again. I knew it was an attempt to goad me. I didn’t move from where I stood. He stepped forward in the same way once more, then shifted his body weight forward. His sword grazed my spear as he raised it high.

I’d shuffled back a half step without needing to consider it. The raised sword swung down at me, and in that same instant, my spear thrust forward like lightning.

I’d aimed my weapon at his right hand—the one that held his sword. It found its way between the seams of his armor plates, and I felt the thin tip enter his gauntlet, cutting through the flesh and bone.

“Gah!” Canka groaned.

I swept the spear sideways, tearing it free from his armor-coated flesh, and pushing aside the sword in his grasp in the process.

I aimed the next thrust at his face, but his left hand blocked me.

I was confused for a moment. *Where's his sword?*

Canka's left hand had gripped the end of the spear while it was embedded in his right hand. His gauntlets didn't have plates over the palms, only leather. The point of my spear shredded his fingers as he held it.

I pulled my spear back, out of his grasp.

"Uuuuugh!" Canka immediately raised his right hand while letting out a war cry.

Where's the sword?

Canka wasn't holding it anymore.

He's going to use his fist?!

I could feel my rational thought processes interrupting my state of total concentration. I took a step back, drawing back the spear with me, and just barely dodged his punch. Though the flesh of his palm was torn up, the armor plating on the back of his hand turned his fist into a hunk of metal that he could swing at me. A hit to my head could've meant instant death.

I thrust the spear at his face once again. Canka opened his left hand, blood pouring from it, and used it to guard the region below his eyes.

That won't stop me.

His hand blocked the spear before it could reach his face. The point had probably lost much of its sharpness after it had penetrated through steel once already. Suddenly, the spear point slipped from his grasp, entered his helm, and penetrated the flesh on the left side of his skull.

"You...!"

Despite now being heavily wounded, Canka swung his right arm at me. With my short spear embedded in his face, I was right within punching range.

I released both hands from the spear and dodged his attack by moving even closer. I was so close that I almost threw myself against his chestplate. By then, I'd already drawn my dagger with my right hand.

I fixed my left eye on my target and, with a V-shaped motion, I moved my hand back before thrusting the dagger forward with all my might. I could feel it cutting through soft flesh, then bone.

Canka made a strange sound. “Groh.”

The dagger had passed between his teeth, entered his mouth, and stabbed so deeply into his upper skull that it had reached his brain. I moved my body out of his path as I pulled it free, then put some distance between us.

It was a fatal wound. Relief filled me, and I felt my state of intense concentration melting away.

He can't fight with a wound like that. There's no way.

Somehow, however, Canka took two steps toward me on unsteady feet. He pulled out the spear that still hung from his face, then discarded it on the ground like he was ridding himself of a nuisance. With that action complete, his strength left him. He collapsed onto his back. I knew he wouldn't be able to get up again.

I moved closer, wanting to see his face.

Canka coughed. It seemed that blood was pooling in his throat, leaving him unable to breathe. He was in a gruesome state, but still his eyes were open and looking at me despite the damage I'd done to his brain. I didn't feel any resentment in his gaze. We were both warriors who took pride in our combat skills, and we'd fought with all we had.

A deep respect for him grew inside me. “I can't believe how strong you were. I won't get many more opportunities to use moves like those. You were a worthy opponent.”

Canka didn't reply.

“Do you want me to end it?”

He nodded, wordlessly. His throat must've been completely blocked.

“Tilt your head back. I'll make it quick.”

Below Canka's jaw was the steel plate that protected his neck. He did as he was told. I picked up the spear he'd thrown down and thrust it through the

seam that opened up. The spear cut through his throat.

“Gohh...”

Canka winced for a moment, then he went limp with his eyes half-open. It was over.

I took another look at Canka’s face and saw the bandage soaked in dark red blood and the wounds that I’d caused. It was so horrible I wanted to avert my eyes.

I would’ve sewn his wounds closed, washed away the blood, and left his remains looking presentable, but I couldn’t spare the water or the time. The best alternative was to place our torn poncho over the top half of his body.

Next, I decided I ought to give him a funeral of some sort. Ms. Ether had explained the procedure to me. As I struggled to recall the details, I remembered her saying that the first step was to place a cross on the deceased’s chest. I didn’t have a cross with me, but a sword with a hilt would be good enough on the battlefield.

I began by placing Canka’s longsword on his chest.

“Lord Almighty, we ask that you offer holy guidance for this one whose life in our world has reached its end as he embarks on the path to the netherworld. With his sacred mission complete, he now leaves us, having earned the right to walk the sacred path without straying. May holy guidance be given unto him. Alleluia.”

Since I wasn’t a clergy member—I wasn’t even baptized for that matter—the words meant little coming from me, but it might offer peace of mind to others.

Holy guidance was one of the four mysteries, which meant it had great importance in Canka’s religion. The four were baptism, confession, marriage, and holy guidance. They originated from text written by Yeesus himself, whereas the sacraments of oath-making and ordination didn’t hold the same significance.

This ritual essentially created a signpost that helped the deceased find their way to the next life without getting lost. It was like giving someone their last

rites. It wasn't as though failure to receive holy guidance would cause someone's soul to aimlessly roam in this world for all eternity, or anything like that. The ritual simply gave nobles peace of mind, and society deemed it a proper way to pay respects to someone after death.

I used the tip of my knife to carve words into Canka's armor.

"This one has embarked on the path to the netherworld under holy guidance. His name is Canka Willens."

Now, whoever discovered the body wouldn't have to worry over whether anyone had performed the holy guidance sacrament or not... If they ever found the body, that is.

However, my words wouldn't be very convincing unless I also wrote who performed the ritual, so in small letters I added, "Clergyman Huguenot Francis."

Now that I'd finished, I stood up, causing pain to shoot through the bottom of my left foot. It hadn't hurt much at all during our fight, but walking was going to be agony from now on.

While trying not to tread on the sole of my foot, I limped over to the place where Carol sat watching me.

"It's over."

"I saw..."

It was difficult to describe Carol's expression. Her smile looked like a display of her unwavering spirit, but she also appeared to be in shock.

"Now I've given you a bad memory."

It had been a tense moment when Carol had been taken hostage with the sword to her neck. More importantly, I'd killed someone right in front of her. Carol wasn't your average pampered lady, but even she was bound to experience some level of shock.

"No... You didn't. I knew you'd save me."

"You did?"

There was no way she could have known that since my odds of winning had

been less than fifty percent, but I could take it to mean that she'd believed in me the whole time.

"Well... No one else has attacked us after all that. He really must've been alone," I told her.

"I don't know what he said, but what if he had a friend who gave up on him and ran off?"

"That's possible."

At least two men had run off virtually uninjured after last night's fight. If they weren't here, it was either because they'd left carrying a message, or because they'd deserted Canka. The former was highly likely assuming that Canka had insisted on continuing to chase us despite all their supplies having been burned.

"Well... It's no use worrying about them," I said. "They're too weak to follow us. Let's just focus on doing what we can."

"You're right."

"Luckily, it's just a little further to the village. I think I can walk...with some effort." I wouldn't be able to carry Carol anymore with this injured foot, though. "Let's keep going once we've had some breakfast."

"Okay."

II

With the oil paper draped over Canka's body and some stones in place to hold it down, we began moving. We kept walking for about an hour.

"This is tough going."

I leaned against a tree trunk to take a short rest. I wasn't out of breath, but I'd been wincing in pain with each step. My injury was wearing me down mentally.

I thought I'd be able to keep going if I used the trees around us to support myself, but I still had to walk unaided from one tree to another. They weren't as helpful as I'd expected anyway, since I couldn't use the vertical trunks to shift the weight from my legs to my arms like I would with horizontal handrails.

To make matters worse, the pain in my foot grew more intense the further I walked. By this point I had to walk on my heel.

“Ahh...” Carol, following just a little behind, wasn’t in good shape either.

She was using the staff, but I could tell it was becoming more and more painful for her to walk.

Shifting my weight around on my foot was one way to lessen the pain, but Carol’s ankle was injured. Putting any weight on her bad leg would leave her in intense pain, even if just for a moment. Agony would fill her mind, acting like a chisel that chipped away at her willpower with each step.

“How about we put our shoulders together?” I suggested.

“Yeah...” She was so quiet I could barely hear her.

I walked back to her.

“Haah... Haah...” she panted. “You could’ve waited for me to catch up.”

I didn’t realize until she’d pointed it out, but she was right—my action had been pointless.

“I figured you’d get lonely,” I said.

“Ah... Yeah, I might.” It was an honest answer, as if she wasn’t thinking about what she was saying.

“All right... Shoulders together.”

“Okay.”

I put my arm around Carol’s shoulders, and she did likewise. Our heights were a little different.

“Are you all right? Our injuries are in my left foot and your right ankle, so we can’t share a leg. But let’s take turns putting our weight on each other. We’ll use a rhythm like we’re marching and keep the weight on whoever’s using their good leg.”

“All right.”

“Okay, here goes.”

Carol's shoulder twitched as she put her weight on her right leg. I could tell she was in pain. But she was putting some of her weight onto my shoulder, so it had to help a little. Next, I stepped forward with my left foot, putting a little weight on Carol's shoulder just like she'd done to me. Carol's left leg was unharmed, so it could support a little extra weight from me.

The regular marching drills we'd attended in the past must've helped, because we quickly got into the rhythm. It was easy.

"It's working."

"Yeah," Carol nodded. "But you can lean on me a little more. Don't hold back."

I hadn't even realized I had been. "You're sure?"

"I know you feel like you're the man and you've got to treat the woman carefully, but it'll just mean more problems for me if your wound gets infected. My left leg's just fine."

Carol had been through the same intense training as me, so she was undoubtedly strong. If it weren't for her injuries, she would be powerful enough to run with someone as light as Myalo in her arms.

"Got it," I said. "I'll lean on you."

"You've got to let me help at times like this."

"Yeah."

Failing to accept help was a source of weakness...though I already felt I'd been relying on her plenty lately.

We walked like that for over six hours, with a few short breaks here and there, before emerging onto a small road that divided the forest in two. The surface was made of uneven cobbles, but they'd been carefully maintained.

I remembered using this road several times before. The width, the cobblestones, everything about it assured me that it was the road that branched off from the main highway and led to Nikka Village.

"Ahhh..." Carol was so completely exhausted that all the strength left her. I

felt her weight push against my shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Ah, sorry...”

Carol collected herself and stood up straight once more. I looked over and noticed the worried look had vanished from her face. Her features were gradually relaxing as a sense of relief filled her. I understood why—she must’ve wanted to sit down and cry tears of joy.

Carol seemed to think that help was waiting for us at Nikka Village. Since I’d considered that unlikely right from the start, Carol’s relief at knowing we were almost there was greater than mine. Still, hope was a good thing to have. I wasn’t going to say anything that might quash it.

“Well? Wanna rest?” I asked.

“No, I’m still all right.”

“Then let’s keep walking.”

We turned left and began following the road. Although I remembered how the path looked, this section wasn’t particularly familiar. I couldn’t predict how much further it was to the village. If we were unlucky, we’d have another day’s journey ahead of us.

“Let’s stop for a moment,” I said.

When we came to a stop, I took out my watch. It was 2:30 in the afternoon.

“What’s wrong?” Carol asked.

“I’m just wondering whether we’ll get there today. Looks like we won’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure where we are. It’s possible we got lucky and we’re right next to the village, but I doubt it.”

“No, we’re close.”

Oh? How can she know?

“The cobbles on this road are in a better state the closer we are to the

village,” Carol explained.

“Are they?”

“Yeah. Looks to me like we’re closer to the village than the highway.”

I hadn’t noticed it myself, but she was right. The road here was used by the villagers to access the forest, making it the most-used section of the road. As such, the cobbles were better maintained than elsewhere.

“I’m surprised you remembered.”

“It was my first time in a little village like this... It was all so new that I paid attention to a lot of things. I wanted to imagine how the villagers lived. We’ll see the woodcutter’s hut a little further ahead.”

I remembered the hut too.

The woodcutter had a few simple buildings in the forest where he worked on timber. Building materials had to be carried off in the form of logs with the help of workers, but firewood could be cut into appropriately sized pieces and carried into the village on a large cart. We’d likely find several logs left to dry out next to the hut, meant for use in construction.

“If that’s the case, we’re really close,” I said.

Since I hadn’t known our position accurately, I’d been following a course that would take us out onto this road. It was pure luck that we’d emerged at a point close to the village—so lucky in fact, that I’d call it a miracle.

“Yeah, I think we are.”

“Then let’s keep going. I wanna sleep in a proper bed tonight.”

We finally reached Nikka Village just as the sun was beginning to set.

Having used every ounce of strength to get here, we stood at the entrance to the village and took it all in. It was like time had stopped. Everything was just as it had been when we’d been here twenty days ago.

The bonfire site we’d put together with the observation unit was still intact, along with the blackened charcoal from a previous fire, in the town square that

lay in the center of the houses. The only difference was that the unit members, birds, and wagons of supplies were all gone.

“There’s...no one here,” Carol said, her voice full of disappointment.

“Yeah...”

“Ah, they’re...gone,” Carol essentially repeated herself.

I couldn’t think of anything to say to her.

Although my disappointment didn’t match hers, I felt downhearted nonetheless. It had only been a faint hope, but if there’d been a few friendly soldiers here, we would’ve been sleeping on clean beds in Reforme the next day. No longer would our lives have been hanging by a thread—we would’ve simply had to wait to be carried home. Carol must’ve fantasized about that same thing repeatedly.

“What? Don’t tell me you can’t walk any further?” I said.

“I can...”

“Look, the houses are still here.”

The worst-case scenario would’ve been arriving only to find that the village had already turned into an enemy outpost. All the supplies here would’ve been lost, and we couldn’t have even gotten near the place.

The next worst thing would’ve been if the village had been burned down—in other words, if it had fallen prey to their scorched-earth tactics.

Since the houses were still here, there was still a silver lining.

“We’ll have a fireplace, beds, and even linens. With a little effort, we can heat a bath. We’re about to eat hot food, bathe, and sleep in comfy soft beds. Things aren’t so bad.”

I meant it. Recently, we’d been suffering, chilled to the bone in the cold air, unable to warm ourselves by a fire.

“That sounds nice.” Carol sounded pleased as she remembered all the everyday comforts we’d once taken for granted. It must’ve given her some consolation.

“Can you walk?” I asked.

“Yep. I feel better now.”

“We need to be sure it’s not an ambush. Let’s circle around the village until we reach the mayor’s house,” I suggested.

“Got it.”

Part of me felt I was being overly cautious, but I wouldn’t let myself get careless now. In much the same way that someone living alone still minded their manners despite the lack of anyone watching, there were certain things that always felt necessary out here in the war zone. I felt like our luck would run out the moment I started to take chances.

We moved stealthily along the boundary between the village and the forest, examining each house as we made our way to the mayor’s home.

There was nothing unusual about any of the houses as far as I could see. All was quiet, and there were no signs of life.

Without some incredible skill, a large party of pursuers couldn’t set traps for us without leaving traces of their activity. It seemed the village was safe.

We walked around the mayor’s home to the front entrance. Outside the building, there was a place for tethering birds or horses. It was a thick, horizontal log that stood as high as my arm, and it was supported by stakes that had been driven into the ground on either side. It looked no different from before.

I tried turning the front door’s doorknob. It offered no resistance—the door was unlocked.

It was the same familiar entrance hall with the meeting room to its right. Various things were strewn across the floor, though, so it was messier than the last time I was here. It looked like the unit had met here after returning. It was unsurprising that they’d left the place a mess given that they wouldn’t be returning to the village.

I moved my arm away from Carol’s shoulders. There were so many things to lean on in the house that we could get around easily.

“Let’s look for written notes first before we start moving things around,” I said.

“A note? Yeah, there’s a chance they’ve left one.”

The unit might’ve retreated to Reforme, but they’d clearly been back here at least once. They should’ve had time to leave us a message.

“There’s more than ‘a chance’—Myalo wouldn’t forget.”

“Yeah...”

Only someone clueless would neglect to leave a message. We could count on Myalo. I felt sure that no matter how chaotic the situation, she would’ve found the time to leave something here for us.

“All right. So let’s look for it.”

“We’ll just take a quick look for now,” I replied. “We can search again later if we don’t see it.”

As I spoke, I scanned the area around us. When I looked to my side, I noticed something unusual above a box for storing shoes—a magnificent, amber-colored ram’s horn. At about eighty centimeters long, it was hard to miss.

Granted, a ram’s horn wasn’t as valuable as an elephant’s ivory tusk, since those had archaeological value. Still, items like this had some practical uses and were often kept as souvenirs. This one had been carefully removed and polished.

The problem with these things was the smell, which was so powerful that it essentially became a taste. Putting a badly treated horn in your mouth would be like taking a bite of some sort of pungent beast meat jelly. The thought brought back bad memories—last time I’d tried to blow a ram’s horn, I’d been left with a headache that lasted a whole day. It had been in a box left open, so I’d thought that enough of the odor had already escaped. You could say I’d only had my own foolishness to blame. Unlike that horn, however, the surface of this one had been shaved on the inside and out, and it looked too old to have much of a smell remaining.

It rested on a decorative stand that held it up like a pair of arms. The stand, in

turn, rested on a box for storing shoes. Nothing about the arrangement was unusual. It was perfectly normal to put such a souvenir on display in the entryway. What *was* odd was that I'd originally seen it placed in the study I'd used on the second floor. Since I knew its old location, it looked out of place to me when I saw it here.

There was no reason for someone to have carried this down the stairs while making a hasty retreat. If they'd used it to sound a signal, it would've been thrown down on the floor by the entrance; the stand wouldn't have been carried down with it.

When I examined it closer, I noticed a piece of paper peeking out from under the horn. I shifted the horn in order to retrieve the note trapped between it and the stand.

It said, “— — — *”

Ah, I get it.

The answer came to me quickly. I opened the shoe compartment and looked under the lid. I found four letters attached there with tacks.

The “— *” corresponded to the whistle signals we used. It meant “down.” Commonly used whistle signals were often notated this way in textbooks. Since it was left below the horn, an eagle rider would soon guess what the code meant.

“Found them,” I said.

“Already? That was quick.”

“She hid them where they'd be easy to find.”

Myalo had been with me on the day I'd tried blowing the foul ram's horn. Anyone else might've overlooked this item, but there was no chance I'd miss it given the strong memory I had in association.

“Okay, you can read it first while I make us some food,” Carol said.

“You can do it by yourself?”

“I'm fine. There's lots to support myself on in this house.”

“All right. I’ll leave you to it.”

I took my lighter from my pocket and gave it to Carol. “You know how to use it, right? Don’t burn yourself.”

“I won’t.”

We headed in opposite directions as I entered the meeting room.

I sat down on a comfortable chair with a deep backrest, which was much cushier than the ordinary chairs that had wooden seats and backrests. Liao had carried it in from another house. He’d always seemed pleased with it.

Each of the four letters had a seal with a sequential number written over it. Naturally, the seals were all unbroken. I tore open the first letter and began reading.

To you,

It’s important that I don’t reveal your identity, so I’ve decided to write in this style, just in case.

Our Situation:

HE may have informed you of our defeat, but in truth, we have few details of the losses sustained.

At the time of writing this letter, a full two days have passed since your accident.

We believe that our forces moved out onto the battlefield, failed to break through the enemy lines, and withdrew. Losses on our side do not appear to have been great, but we believe the mobile force supporting the withdrawal lost most of its strength.

Some of our foot soldiers are holed up in the fortress, but we hear morale is low.

The chieftains of the Shiyalta Kingdom refused to enter the fortress, instead withdrawing to Reforme.

This is merely a summary of what we have been able to ascertain so far.

The Unit's Condition:

1. We held a leadership council the previous evening and decided to withdraw toward Reforme.

The council concluded that a rescue attempt would likely result in great losses with no positive outcomes.

Since most unit members are only able to move across land, we also concluded the chance of those members being placed in mortal danger due to their failure to withdraw is high, thus remaining in place will cause our situation to deteriorate.

2. HE holds absolute authority at present.

There are currently no differences of opinion amongst members of the leadership. However, there have been bitter disputes across family lines. Thirty members, plus a further four with great respect toward THE OTHER, strongly disagreed with the plan to withdraw. HE asked me to persuade these members to agree to the withdrawal.

3. Yesterday I made contact with THE SWORD. After I advised on what action you are likely to have taken, THE SWORD decided to hurry toward the site of the accident. THE SWORD will be acting alone in a rescue attempt.

4. We have decided to send word of your accident to THE MOTHER and THE MOTHER'S HUSBAND, and to HIS father. Thus far, we deem these the only people likely to send aid.

-Final Notes:

Though the unit is leaving the village, I will return to the site MYSELF two days from now unless somehow unable. The fortress has not yet fallen, so we anticipate minimal risk when visiting by kingeagle.

I believe I can give assistance to you, so please remain in place after reading this letter if you're able. If you must continue moving before very long, either smash the horn while it still rests on the stand, or throw the horn outside.

There are SPARKS hidden UNDERGROUND.

SPARKS are heavy and would delay our withdrawal, so we abandoned what was left.

This concludes my report.

As expected, the unit had withdrawn to Reforme. I got the impression that Liao and Myalo were handling the situation well.

The reason there weren't any names written on the hidden letter was to avoid the possibility that a Shanti slave might translate it. Given the effort involved, I wouldn't generally expect the enemy to get letters like these translated. If they'd guessed Carol's or my identity, though, they might just go that far. Carol's value was obvious, and I was fairly important too. Even by myself, I was valuable enough that the enemy might go to great pains to capture me.

So this was written...May 29th? We'd crashed on May 27th, which makes today June 8th, if I haven't lost track of time.

I decided to read the second letter. I broke it open and found it was just a one-sided sheet of paper.

To you,

Following a meeting, we decided to focus our search efforts along the coastal roads.

I feel that the chances of you returning here are low. But since I cannot think of anywhere else you might go, leaving letters here cannot be completely meaningless.

I will return again in three days.

I'm going to fill the rest of this letter with nonsense. You don't need to read it if you're short on time.

I know that someone of your capability could steal a horse and begin the journey to Reforme in the five days since the crash. It's possible that by the time I return, the search party will have found you. That's my hope.

In that case, I pray no one will ever read these letters.

According to HIM, you're fit enough to climb a tree. I have no doubt you're safe.

But I know nothing of THE OTHER. You may be slowed greatly by your efforts to protect THE OTHER.

I'll end here because I'm out of space.

Where are you right now, and what are you doing?

Myalo hadn't written a date, perhaps fearing it might at some point fall into enemy hands. If she'd been providing precise dates, they could've used it to ambush her during her visits. I could only estimate when it was written, but I guessed it was around June 1st. That would make the next letter's date June 4th—just four days ago.

To you,

We haven't found you yet, which means you must be facing difficulties.

The situation at the fortress is worrying.

Enemies have encircled it, but haven't attempted any attack. They haven't even gotten within longbow range.

The scouts tell us that the enemies are melting down vast quantities of metal on-site. We have learned that they're building a large siege gun.

We believe they are currently breaking apart sand molds, waiting for parts to cool, and mounting them on platforms. They have surrounded themselves with fences, and a great number of soldiers are present, making it difficult to disrupt their work.

Now that it is so important to destroy their siege guns, HE and I were asked to provide information about the BOTTLES that you brought. Refusal to do so might have slowed our efforts at a rescue attempt, so we decided to cooperate. We demonstrated the BOTTLES using some materials we had left over.

It attracted interest. When we were questioned about the contents, we told them honestly that we didn't know how to make more. Upon request, we handed over seventy percent of the STINKING WATER.

We cannot hear the gunfire from here, but it's likely that fighting has resumed recently.

I pray that the fortress won't fall. If it does, it could be too dangerous to visit the village again.

Honestly, now that it's unclear whether you'll visit the village, writing these letters feels pointless. I feel like I'm lost and wandering.

I'd like to come back here again in three days, but it will depend on how things go.

This concludes my report.

Okay... That's about what I expected.

If there *was* a device for launching boulders like the one I'd seen, it would have to be a giant catapult or a cannon. They wouldn't need perfectly spherical boulders for use in a catapult, so I'd already guessed they were for a cannon with a cylindrical barrel. It would probably be forged from brass or bronze.

There was no realistic way of carrying a giant cannon weighing several tons to the site, but carrying several wagonloads of metal ingots there wouldn't be so difficult.

An ordinary gun could be made in a mold after melting down iron. Unlike bronze, however, iron had a crystalline structure that would change in the process of being melted, then cooled. That meant it was likely to crack apart upon firing. Another way to work with iron was to heat it until it was sufficiently pliable and extendable, then hammer it into shape. That approach wasn't practical for something as big as a cannon, though.

Well, I supposed it didn't really matter how they made the thing. The real question was whether their cannon had destroyed the fortress or not.

Still, speculating wouldn't do me any good, especially when I still had another letter to read. The answer would probably be in there.

If she did visit again three days later... I don't even want to think about it, but that would mean she was here just yesterday.

To you,

Yesterday we received word that the fortress had fallen.

I don't know the details or the circumstances, but what's certain is that a flag bearing the cross is flying from the mountain. This place is no longer safe.

As I set out to deliver this letter today, HE tried to stop me. HE said that if I were to think rationally, I'd realize that delivering letters that are unlikely to ever be read wasn't worth the risk. HE may be right. It may be that I've ceased to think rationally.

I don't know whether you'll ever read this.

Please forgive me for using this letter to express feelings that aren't appropriate.

I'm begging you—please come back. I'm anxious every day

that you're not here. It feels like a dark, stormy sea fills my mind whenever I close my eyes, making sleep impossible.

What are you doing right now? Where are you? As the situation worsens, fewer among us still insist you're alive. But I'll never believe you're dead, not even if another month—or even two—go by.

When the enemy approaches Reforme, I'll wear a hood to cover my head, infiltrate the enemy, and search for you. THE ROOMMATE will join me in hope of saving THE OTHER.

Perhaps I'll be going against your wishes by abandoning the unit like this, but I'm going to do it regardless.

I'm thankful to my core that I worked so hard to learn Terolish.

This concludes my report.



I finished reading. It went without saying, but only one thought swirled in my head: *If only we'd gotten here just one day sooner...* It was too late for regrets, though.

The strange effect the crash had had on Myalo's mental state was concerning to me. I suppose it wasn't really a surprise, though, given that Myalo knew nothing of what had become of us. She was bound to start fearing we'd died after twelve days had passed without news.

And now I knew the fortress had already fallen. That left us really stuck. If we spent another ten days walking toward Reforme, there was a good chance we'd arrive behind enemy forces besieging the city.

Now we're well and truly stuck. This is all too much. I heaved a great sigh.

“***!”

Huh? What...?

“Hey.”

I came to my senses as someone shook my shoulders.

I quickly looked behind me to see the source of the voice. It was Carol.

“Whoa... Don’t tell me I fell asleep?” I asked.

“Looks like it.”

Get it together, man. I can’t believe I did that.

I looked at the desk in front of me and saw the letters still strewn across its surface. Those hadn’t been a dream. I remembered that after I’d finished the last one, I’d felt a sense of resignation. Then I’d leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes to think a little. When I’d sighed, it felt good, like I was releasing my exhaustion. That was where my memories ended—I must’ve passed out.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

While Carol was soldiering on despite the pain in her leg, her accomplice was taking a nap. I couldn’t help but feel bad.

“Don’t be. It’s all right... I only woke you up because your food might get cold, and I figured you should sleep in a bed.”

“Ah... Yeah. How long was I out?”

“I don’t think it was very long.”

I looked outside and saw the village had been reduced to black silhouette in the dark of night. The sun had just set, so I must’ve slept for almost an hour.

“Sorry about that...”

“No, I know you’re tired. Anyway, the food’s ready. I would’ve carried it to you, but...” Carol sounded sheepish. She couldn’t carry it because she’d probably drop the plates. Although I was only five meters away, it would’ve been tough to carry them here one at a time.

“Thanks. I’m gonna enjoy it.”

I got up and walked into the kitchen, making sure to keep the weight off my foot in the process.

The meal I found waiting on the table was far more impressive than I'd expected. There was some kind of bird meat—I didn't know what sort—fried in the fat of its own skin. It had been coated with some sort of sauce that I guessed was a mixture of fruit jam and oil. Alongside that, there was a vegetable soup accompaniment. This wasn't the best season for vegetables, but they were good enough to be simmered in a dish. There was also a small mesh basket filled with bread.

"I'm impressed."

It was the first time I'd ever seen Carol's cooking. Frankly, I hadn't been expecting much, but it turned out she was a skilled cook.

"No... I'm just an amateur..." Carol sounded a little embarrassed.

"Did you learn this along with tea-making?"

"Kinda. It'd be embarrassing if I burned the food whenever I had to cook. Anyway, eat up."

Good idea. It'd be a waste if we let it go cold.

I sat on my chair and picked up a fork. "Thank you," I told her.

"Enjoy."

I bit into the mystery bird meat and experienced a unique scent along with the flavor of the sweet and sour sauce. The meat tasted like it'd been smoked, which made sense—it would've gone rotten if it had been stored raw. I never realized meat went so well with sweet and sour sauce after it'd been dried and toughened.

The soup contained some leafy vegetables along with small pieces of the same meat. It looked delicious. Juices from the meat floated on top of the dish, and when I lifted out a vegetable with my fork, I found that they had imparted the greens with their flavor. Eating this food made me feel warm deep down inside.

"This is great," I noted.

"Really? I'm glad."

With a relieved look on her face, Carol continued watching me eat without so

much as touching her own food.

“What’s wrong? You’re not hungry?”

“Huh? Oh... Ah, I’ll have some too,” she said, like she hadn’t realized she wasn’t eating.

We finished our meal in no time at all. Tea came next, and Carol presented me with a cup of dark green liquid. I hadn’t drunk tea she’d made in a good while. I had to wonder what sort of flavor she’d prepared this time.

I took a sip. The intense bitter taste went all the way to the back of my tongue. It was so harsh that I couldn’t find anything nice to say about it. “Ugh...”

My reaction didn’t seem to surprise Carol at all. “Heh. Tastes awful, doesn’t it?”

“Kinda. What is this...?”

“That bitter taste’s supposedly good for you.”

Good for me? It’s some kind of medicated tea?

Carol was calmly drinking a cup of the same brew.

“Well if it’s good for me, I’ll bear it...”

I gulped it down. I thought it would leave an aftertaste, but it was surprisingly refreshing once I’d finished it.

“Yuri... Are we going to sleep after this?”

“Yeah... I was hoping to bathe first, but it’s dark already.”

Heating the water would be hard work. We couldn’t start on it now.

“Then let me see your wound.”

“Ah, yeah.”

I’d forgotten. We had to treat my injury somehow.

Even after the fight with Canka had made it worse, I’d simply left the bandage in place. It would probably get infected unless we did something.

Carol cleared away the tableware, favoring one leg all the while, then put a

bottle of spirits and some cloth down in their place.

Now that the sun had gone down and plunged everything into darkness, the light of the candle on the table wasn't enough for us to rely on. Carol crouched by the oven and used its flame to ignite a lamp. Then she removed the lid from a pot on the oven, releasing a cloud of steam. She had some water heated already. Using a ladle, she transferred some hot water into something resembling a wash basin.

Wow, she has everything ready. She must've done it all while I was sleeping.

After noisily sliding my chair away from the table, Carol sat down in front of me, and put a large cloth on her lap.

"Rest your foot here without taking off your shoe."

"Okay."

I lifted up my left leg and put it down on Carol's thigh, with my dirty shoe still on my foot. Heavy pain shot through it as I moved, but after experiencing that same sensation countless times that day, I'd grown used to it.

Carol removed the shoe, then peeled away the dirty bandage—really little more than scraps of cloth. The cloth pieces had repeatedly dried out, then been soaked with fresh blood again. There was also dirt caked over them. In the light of the lamp, they looked closer to black than red.

As Carol carefully peeled off the pieces, she threw them into a bucket in an area of the kitchen that had an earthen floor. Each one sounded wet as it hit the bucket.

"Ugh..." Carol frowned as she looked at the wound.

Is it really that bad?

"I'm going to wipe off the blood," she said.

The water in the wash basin had cooled a little now. Carol dipped a faded towel into it and wrung it out.

After waving it in the air a little to cool it further, she began wiping my dirty foot clean while avoiding the wound.

It stung a little, but it also felt kind of good—sort of like a foot spa.

Once she'd finished wiping away the dirt, she threw the towel into the bucket. Next, she soaked another towel in the water. This time, rather than wringing it out thoroughly, she put it on the wound while it was still wet.

"Ngh..." I gritted my teeth and endured the feeling it caused. It wasn't all that hot, but I could feel the water seeping into the wound.

"Are you all right?"

"Keep going," I said.

As she gently pressed the towel against the wound, it washed out the dirt trapped inside.

"How's it look?" I asked.

"You might want to judge for yourself."

"Yeah, I suppose."

With my foot still resting on Carol's lap, I bent my ankle to look at the bottom of my own foot. Even from this distance, I could see it clearly. Carol was thoughtful enough to position the lamp closer to the wound.

The thread in the wound was taut, and the holes in my skin that it passed through were stretched wide and ready to tear. It was a mess. After having it carefully sewn up the day before, it was gradually opening up again. And now that my foot was clean, I could see the fresh blood leaking out. On top of that, the region around the wound was red and badly swollen.

"This needs sewing up again," I said.

"Yeah, I thought it would. I've got the gear ready."

"Well, let's stop the bleeding first."

After a little thought, I decided to use my own clothes. They'd gotten dirty from me wearing them all day every day, so it was time I changed out of them anyway. I began undressing.

"Whoa," Carol blurted, startled.

"We're past that, aren't we?"

We'd wiped our bodies clean by the side of streams multiple times while we'd traveled. Plus, even before that, she often saw me topless during the summer at the Knight Academy.

"S-Sorry... It's nothing."

Rather than wonder at Carol's unexpected embarrassment, I took the thick, long-sleeved shirt I'd been wearing and wrapped it around my thigh over my pants. Using all my strength, I tied it so tight that the fabric almost tore.

Next, I pulled over the chair that was behind me and lay down. It was best to keep the wound higher than my heart. This method of reducing blood pressure to slow bleeding worked particularly well for wounds in the legs.

"Can you wash the inside of it thoroughly with spirits?" I requested.

Given the state it had been in, an infection was likely. I didn't want to lose a foot to gangrene.

"Okay... Wanna drink a little first to numb the pain?"

"No, it's fine. That'll make it harder to stop the bleeding."

"All right. Okay, here goes."

Carol cut open the stitches she'd made from her own hair.

"This'll sting. Sure you can take it?"

"Let's get it over with."

No sooner than I'd finished speaking, a burning sensation shot through the wound. The intense pain almost made me fall off the chair. Carol was pouring spirits into the open wound, then inserting her finger to clean the deepest part. I began to get light-headed. I clenched my teeth so hard that they hurt. I wished I'd asked for something to bite down on. It was nothing like what I'd felt the day before. Either because it was a different type of spirit, or because the wound was in such a worse state now, the pain was much more intense.

"Done. Now I'll sew it back up."

"R-Right..."

Now she was pulling the thread through my flesh, but I barely felt it—the pain

from cleaning my injury had been *that* bad. I couldn't explain why, but it had been so agonizing that it had dulled my mind.

After Carol had spent some time sewing up my foot, she said, "I'm done. How's that?"

I sat up and looked at my foot. The stitches covered much more area than before. Carol must've had a knack for mending wounds, because my injury had been perfectly closed up.

"Wow, nice work. Thanks—much appreciated."

"Next... I've got this weird ointment. Should I put it on you?"

Carol was looking at a container on the table. It was flat and shaped like an ink pad for a stamp.

"Let me see."

I examined the wooden container that she handed to me. "Yurumi Healing Ointment" had been skillfully carved into it—not something done by a child for a few coins.

This medicine looks like something made by a witch family. Come to think of it, back in their early days, weren't they mostly healers who made remedies like this one?

I opened the lid. The scent of the contents was fresh and gentle, unlike the sharp smell of menthol. The color was a cloudy yellow; I guessed it was a mixture of purified oil and beeswax. When I put some on my hand, it felt soft and creamy. It was a nice ointment.

The question was whether it would be good for the wound. I had no way to know. But I guessed it was made from refined plant oils, which meant it probably wouldn't have bacteria growing in it.

Well... I can just wash it off if it stings.

"Put some on me," I said.

"All right."

Carol put a dollop on her finger, then rubbed it into the wound. It didn't hurt.

Well, it was painful when Carol put pressure on the wound, but not because of the ointment seeping into it. Once she was done, she put a fresh piece of cloth over it, then bandaged my foot tightly with a long strip of cloth.

Now that there was some pressure to stop the bleeding, I removed the tourniquet around my thigh.

“Oh,” Carol said suddenly, like she’d made a mistake. “Maybe you should’ve taken off your pants first.”

Probably, yeah.

Now that the bandage around my foot had made it bulkier, it looked too big to fit through my pant leg. I definitely didn’t want to lie down on clean sheets without getting these pants off first, though—they were filthy because I’d been wearing them constantly.

“I’m sure I’ll get my foot out if I cut the cuff. It’s not like I’ll ever wear these again.”

Fine quality though they were, I didn’t want to clean them up and keep wearing them. I could find plenty of other pairs of pants in this house.

“All right then.”

Carol used the scissors to cut through the blood-and-mud-covered cuffs.

“Now take them off,” she said.

“What? Now?”

“Yeah. There’s hot water left, so I figured you can clean yourself with it. I’ve got fresh clothes ready too.”

“Oh, sounds nice.”

I began to get up.

“Whoa, hold on.”

Carol took a large sandal and put it over my wrapped-up foot. Now the bandage wouldn’t get sullied by the earthen floor.

Wow, she’s thinking of everything today.

When I took my left foot off her thigh, Carol turned her back to me.

After I'd stripped completely, I soaked a cloth in the hot water and wrung it out a little. First, I wiped my face with it. The cloth was hot, wet, and clean, removing all the dirt from my skin. The simple act felt amazing.

I cleaned my whole body, starting from the least dirty areas. At one point, the cloth got so filthy that I had to switch it for a clean one. Once I was done with my lower body, only my back remained.

"Carol, if you're okay with it, could you wipe my back?"

"Huh...? Oh, okay."

Carol stood up with her back still to me.

"Mh!" I couldn't see her face, but I sensed that she was holding back a shriek. "Can't you put some pants on first?!"

"They'll get wet."

"Seriously..." she groaned. She wrung out the cloth, put it against my back, and began to scrub hard. "You sure are muscular."

"I'm no Dolla, but I train plenty."

"It's not just that... I mean the way your muscles grow. You're nothing like a woman."

"Well, yeah."

It would be a bit weird if I had a feminine figure after all that training.

"All right. That'll do it," Carol said after she'd scrubbed my back from top to bottom.

"Thanks. Now if you want to turn away..."

"All right."

I put on the clothes Carol had prepared for me. There were no holes or patches. For commoner clothing, these were pretty good.

"I'm done."

Carol turned to face me. "Oh good. They fit you."

“Yeah. Do you want to wipe yourself clean too?”

“Of course. And I’ve got clean clothes. Why don’t you go to bed now?”

She must’ve wanted to sleep. I knew she’d be ready to drop from exhaustion. Still, her suggestion felt rather sudden.

“Shouldn’t I clean your back first?” I asked.

“Yuri... I don’t expect you to understand women, but you should know that no woman wants to show someone their body when it’s dirty. Especially not when...”

Not when...?

“Never mind. Just go to bed.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “I’ll sleep in the same room I used to use.”

“Sure.”

“Good night.”

After walking a little while keeping the weight off my bad foot, I came to my old room.

I put my lamp down, lay in bed, and pulled up the sheets. It felt like I was enveloped by comfort and relaxation. For someone who’d grown up in civilized society, it was easy to take it all for granted. As I quickly drifted to sleep, I felt deep appreciation for the comforts that I’d once enjoyed without much thought.

III

I awoke the following day while the light of dawn was still faint and sunlight had just barely crept into the room.

I hadn’t felt the effects of a proper night’s sleep in so long. It was nothing like waking up with my back aching after resting against a hard tree trunk. I loved the way the soft blanket enveloped my entire body in warmth. It felt like I’d returned to human civilization.

I looked to my side and saw Carol. She’d slept in the same bed curled up

beside me.

She got into bed with me?

I was surprised, but not bothered. I'd been sleeping beside her every day for some time now, after all.

Her face was so beautiful that it fascinated me. I couldn't help but feel something when I looked at her.

I don't wanna get up. I just want to enjoy this warmth, I thought, even though I wasn't sleepy in the slightest. I'd drifted off soon after sunset, and now the sun had risen, so I'd probably slept for nine or ten hours. There was no way I could still be sleepy.

I slowly climbed out of bed while taking care not to wake Carol. A jolt of pain shot through my foot—a reminder of our situation. I was relieved to see that neither the bottom of the bed nor the sheets had been stained with blood. There was a bit on the bandage that had been tied tight around the wound, but that was all.

I put on slippers and silently left the room.

Once I was in the kitchen, I put on a jacket, swapped my slippers for outdoor sandals, and ate a piece of hard bread.

I stepped outside and felt the cold air against my face.

I made my way to the rear of the house, going around it counterclockwise so the building's wall was constantly on my left side to help me walk.

I entered a small shed, which was a mess inside. There was a jumble of assorted items that had been thrown in here, just like when I'd last seen it. There was an axe for cutting firewood, a saw for removing branches, and hammers of various sizes for driving in everything from stakes to nails.

Someone must've been making shelves or some other basic furniture, because several wooden planks and rods had been cut to size and left in here, along with a pile of wood scraps.

Making a crutch was going to be easy.

I started by considering my approach. I wanted to have two long, curved rods with short rods bridging between them, just like the crutches I was familiar with, but obviously I didn't have any perfectly shaped pieces of wood. Instead, I'd have to make the crutch in an F-shape, even if that would turn out a little unbalanced.

Thinking it would be best if the crutch had some curvature, I used an arched piece of wood for the long vertical part, then attached two more pieces to it horizontally while measuring against my own body to decide their position. The part that the user gripped and the part that rested under the armpit couldn't simply be nailed on, or they wouldn't be secure, so I reinforced them both from below with diagonal struts.

Now to try it.

It wasn't the sturdiest of things, but I could put my weight onto it without it breaking apart.

I looked outside and noticed there was ample daylight now.

Although I'd been doing simple work, there'd been many steps in the process, such as making holes in the wood with a gimlet and using a chisel to shape the round rods before attaching square pieces to them.

Using my new crutch, I went back to the house where I found Carol already out of bed.

She was sulking in the entrance way. In her hand was an unfamiliar staff, similar to a walking stick, rather than the one I'd made for her. It must've belonged to someone who'd lived here. Needless to say, it was well-made, and the handle had a curved shape that made it easier to grasp. It was far better than the staff I'd given her.

"Hey. Good morning."

"At least tell me before you wander off somewhere. I was worried."

Oh, I made her worried? I guess she can't exactly call out to me given our situation.

"Sorry. I didn't want to wake you up."

“I would’ve felt a lot better if you had.”

She’s right... I’d feel the same way if I were in her shoes.

“You’re right. I should’ve said something.”

“I’m not angry with you.”

“Okay... Where’d you find that staff?”

“It was upstairs.”

I guessed she’d been searching for me on the building’s second floor. She wouldn’t have expected me to go outside.

“Sorry. I’ll tell you before I go anywhere next time.”

“Make sure you do. I’ve prepared some hot water, so let’s have breakfast.”

After a basic meal consisting of bread and soup, plus an assortment of simple foods like cheese and ham, Carol poured us some tea.

I was nervous as I raised the cup to my lips, but this time it wasn’t so bitter. In fact, it had a pleasant fragrance and tasted great too.

“This is nice tea. You’re not making yesterday’s sort anymore?”

“No, I think once was enough.”

I thought she’d force us to drink some after every meal until our wounds healed up.

“Why? Is it bad to drink too much of it?”

“Well... Um... I heard something about stones forming if you have too much. You know, the painful ones.”

Kidney stones...? No thank you. I’d never had them before, but I’d heard they were excruciating. They also happened to be much more common in men.

Although surgery wasn’t generally attempted in Shiyalta, appendix and kidney stone removal were the exceptions. Naturally, they often resulted in death through infection, but since the alternative was living with an unbearably painful condition, some were forced to take the risk.

“I’d rather avoid that.”

“Yeah. That’s why I decided to stop making it.”

“Did you read the letters from Myalo yet?”

Carol’s expression darkened somewhat. “Yes... I did.”

In that case, she might not have gone to bed until quite late.

“Okay... Then you know how bad our situation is.”

“Yeah.”

“Everything would’ve worked out fine if we’d just arrived a day earlier... Not that it helps to dwell on it.”

“I felt like I was going to faint.”

Yeah, that’s understandable.

“Anyway, our plan of healing up enough to walk and then heading for Reforme doesn’t look so good now.”

Myalo’s final letter had been written just the day before, so Reforme obviously hadn’t been encircled just yet. But it would be by the time we got there. In fact, it would probably be in enemy hands by then.

“Then should we head for Quonam?” Carol asked.

Quonam was a large inland city to the north of Reforme that served as an important trade center within Kilhina.

“No. No matter where we try walking to, the enemy’s front line is going to overtake us while we’re on the move. There’s no way we can sneak the whole way back to Shiyalta. And most of the food we’ve been eating is what we stole from pursuers.”

Ironically, we’d go hungry if no one was chasing us. There was ample food in this village, but we couldn’t carry enough to last several weeks. We could take five days’ worth at most, and the rest we’d have to find while traveling. That wouldn’t be easy with my foot injury.

“Hmm... It’s a tough one,” Carol said.

“I think we should take a chance and wait here,” I replied.

“Wait...? For Myalo, you mean?”

“No, for the enemy.”

“The enemy? You know we’re not here to fight.”

“What we need are horses. The first soldiers to get here will be scouts, and they’ll be on horseback.”

Sending a few soldiers ahead was standard military practice. An army had to scout out enemy territory before moving through it, lest they repeatedly walk into traps and ambushes. This basic task was routine for cavalymen, making them an essential element of any large force on the move.

Given the local geography, scouts were bound to visit this village. But even if the soldiers that arrived were just here to survey their surroundings, they’d likely be using a tactic similar to reconnaissance in force.

Although reconnaissance in force was primarily intended to scout a location, it was carried out by lightly equipped cavalymen who could engage enemy forces when they came across them. However, they wouldn’t have sufficient strength to wipe out all the enemies in the vicinity, since that wasn’t their goal. If the scouts discovered a large enemy unit, they’d avoid it. Alternatively, they might engage the enemy briefly to test them, then they’d make a quick retreat and provide information to the main force.

For the crusaders, it made perfect sense to carry out reconnaissance in a similar manner. Scouts that avoided all fighting and simply located enemy soldiers would constantly be heading back with news of enemy sightings, making it necessary to send out a separate attack force each time. By using reconnaissance in force, small groups of fleeing soldiers could be eliminated when sighted, allowing the army to continue moving at a faster rate.

“So we lie in wait, eliminate them, then steal their horses?”

“Basically, yeah. Once we’ve got horses, we can overtake the enemy and get to Reforme before they can encircle it.”

I didn’t have to explain to Carol that those scouts would always be far ahead

of the main force, so there'd be no risk of bumping into an army of soldiers if we went out onto the main roads right after encountering the scouts.

"Sounds like a good plan...except for the assumption that we can defeat a reconnaissance force."

Yeah, that's an issue.

"Obviously, we can't assume we'll win. If we get unlucky and a force of a hundred cavalymen shows up, then we're done for."

"Right..." Carol had begun to look gloomy.

I knew how she felt. It was a risky plan that was particularly difficult to stomach, even for someone without our limited options. Still, it gave us a better chance than rushing to Reforme would. And if we were holding on to faint hopes, there was still the possibility that Myalo would pay us one last visit while we waited.

"There are other problems too. We should obviously set up traps while we wait, but based on what Myalo's letter said, the enemy could arrive today."

Needless to say, we had no means of fighting if the enemy arrived at that very moment. There was a real possibility that we'd hear the sound of approaching horse hooves from the road to the village at any second.

"Yeah."

"But we'll only aggravate our wounds if we rush things. Let's proceed calmly."

"You mean you want us to take our time...? Do we really have that luxury? Time's running out. We need those traps in place if we're lying in wait for the enemy." Carol spoke like our backs were against the wall. Well, she wasn't wrong.

"They'll be riding the horses. We can't just put basic traps everywhere, or we might kill the horses too. That'll mean we've wasted our time."

"Then what can we do? What's your plan?"

"I thought you said you'd read Myalo's letters?"

"Are you mocking me now?" Carol's mood had worsened to the point that

she was getting angry with me.

“Did you forget what she said? They left something here for us.”

This house was a private dwelling that had belonged to several generations of mayors, but the space under the floor was a large storage area. The basement was under roughly sixty percent of the building’s floor space—everywhere except the bathroom and rooms with earthen floors. I knew this because my first home in Ho Province had been the same.

The kitchen had an earthen floor, so it didn’t have a lower level because the ovens were located there. Similarly, the conference room (which also doubled as a banquet hall) had an earthen floor so that guests could walk in without removing their outdoor shoes. Finally, the basement didn’t extend to the region below the bathroom either. Technology for fully waterproofing the floor didn’t exist, so water would’ve leaked from there into the lower level.

For similar reasons, Ho Manor’s main building didn’t have a basement because a moat surrounded it, and the residence in Sibiak was the same because it was close to a river. Instead, they both had storehouses constructed aboveground.

I would’ve liked to use this underground storage area back when I’d been storing food for the observation unit, but I’d rented another house instead. I didn’t want it to get mixed up with all of the mayor’s family’s belongings. But now that the battle was lost and the fortress had fallen, such things no longer mattered.

The entrance to the basement was in a corridor close to the bathroom. A square hatch in the floor could be opened to reveal a hole with a ladder leading underground. The entrance was currently concealed by a wooden crate that appeared to be randomly placed. That had to be Myalo’s doing.

After I’d shifted the crate, I opened the hatch and found the ladder to the basement looked the same as it always had. It was almost pitch black inside.

I’m not sure I can climb down...

I placed my crutch on the floor and carefully made my way down the ladder

using my right foot only. It turned out to be easy. The strength in my arms alone was enough to support me as I lowered myself down. Given that I was strong enough to do dozens of pull-ups, I shouldn't have been worried.

"Carol, can you drop my crutch down?"

"Here it comes."

She dropped it, and I caught it.

While using the crutch to keep the weight off my left foot, I cautiously ignited the lighter and looked for a lantern. I found one lying where I last remembered seeing it. I very carefully burned the oil-soaked wick to give myself some light.

Next to the lantern, there was something like a tub with small handles that had rope tied to them. This must've been used to lift food up into the house from the basement.

I threw the bundle of rope up to Carol. She caught it with ease.

"If you tie this to something, you can use it while climbing down."

I held up the lantern to illuminate the basement. In the center of the room was a barrel lying on its side. It looked out of place—must've been knocked over. It was open on one side, and a large pile of black gunpowder had spilled out of it.

This barrel had originally been used for making alcohol. The small hole in its side could be sealed with a stopper, but it lacked a means for opening and resealing the top. It had been opened by breaking off half of its top lid, so now the contents would simply spill out if anyone tried to move it by rolling it.

Since the unit members merely needed somewhere to dump the barrel and its contents, they'd rolled it into the basement from outside without caring.

I held the lamp closer and saw that the spilled gunpowder formed a thick, straight line. Still, there was a lot left in the barrel.

"Don't stand on the gunpowder," I warned Carol as she descended the ladder. "And tread carefully so you don't disturb the dust."

"All right... But isn't the lamp in your hand the biggest risk? If you want light, you should open the door that leads outside."

Carol was referring to the other way into the basement. There was a door outside the house that opened wide to reveal stairs leading down. The unit members must've rolled the barrel in here that way. The ladder in the corridor was more like a back entrance.

"They've buried it to hide it. I noticed that back when I walked around the outside of the house. It's weathered well over the course of ten days or so. I wouldn't want to ruin their work now," I explained.

"Ah, I see."

"We've seen enough. Let's grab some food, then head back up."

If I were to drop the lantern somehow, it'd be the death of both of us. I didn't want to stick around.



I tied a thin hemp rope around a tree trunk.

"Let's see if this works."

I let go of the rope and watched the slack slide away until the whole thing became taut.

We were about five meters from the village, on the road we'd followed the day before.

The rope extended across the road to the opposite side, passed under a hook embedded into a tree, went over a thick branch, and finally headed back down slightly. The very end of it was tied to a large rock that hung in the air.

As a finishing touch, I cut into the rope with a knife to thin part of it out, making it so it was close to breaking from the tension. This weakened part of the rope would just barely support the rock's weight. It would break if anyone ran into it and make the rock fall to the ground.

Below the rock was a large wash bucket, and inside that was a collection of kettles and small pots that we'd gathered from various houses. The sound of the rock landing would be loud enough to hear from the mayor's house.

In summary, we'd created an alarm system.

“It looks good!” Carol called from across the road to confirm that the rock was hanging securely over at her side.

I moved a little to get a better look at the road. We’d chosen a thin rope made from cotton thread that would blend in well with the cobbles on the surface, and it worked—it blended in so well it couldn’t be seen from a distance. It would be even harder for someone on a horse to spot it.

“This should do it, right?” Carol asked after coming over to stand beside me.

“Yeah, we’re done,” I agreed.

Hopefully there’d be no deer or other wild animals charging down the road, or else we’d have to set the whole thing back up again.

“Well, that’s one task finished with...” Carol must’ve broken a sweat because she wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her work clothes as she spoke.

Today’s sunlight was unusually intense for the time of year, increasing the temperature. Even so, it made for a strange sight when Carol had changed into the kind of tattered work clothes that farmers wore.

“Will this really be enough?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’ve got a tripwire set... Let’s leave it at that for now.”

I wasn’t planning on setting a bunch of elaborate traps.

I’d also made a crutch for Carol. I was considering putting down a bed of straw to cushion her as she descended into the basement, but she wasn’t having problems without one. I could forget about that for now.

“How about we take baths?”

“Oh! Yeah!” There was a little excitement in Carol’s voice. She couldn’t hide how happy she was. “Uh... Yes, let’s,” she corrected herself before clearing her throat, as if she was embarrassed by her previous outburst.



“Haah, haah... I’m beat.”

Why’s this well have to be so deep? Is the soil really this far from any water?

When I let go of the rope, the empty well bucket rushed back up to the top

and made a clattering sound as it hit the pulley.

The mechanism used to draw water from this well consisted of two buckets of the same weight joined via a rope of just the right length. The rope passed through a pulley at the top. The weights would balance out if I let go while the rope was in the center, but the system had been unbalanced when I'd let go, causing one of the buckets to rush to the top. Needless to say, it was a lot of work to obtain water using this thing.

I'd remembered making a hand-driven pump in the past because drawing water like this was so stupid. It'd be fine if I only needed enough for cooking, but getting enough to fill a bathtub was a lot of work.

"Are you all right?" Carol asked as she came to fetch a bucket.

When she took the bucket I'd just filled, she left an empty one in its place.

"Yeah, I'm fine. How much more do we need?" I asked.

"We're about...halfway, I think."

"Half..."

Whoa. No way... But I really wanna take that bath.

"Maybe half's enough?" Carol suggested.

"No, I'll be fine as long as I keep taking breaks."

I wanted to soak up to my shoulders.

"Want me to take over?" she asked.

"I find walking harder. I'd rather do this."

"Okay, but don't push yourself too hard. I can do both jobs if you need to stop."

"No..."

I wouldn't let her do that.

"I'll keep taking breaks. We just need to get it filled and heated by nightfall."

I used a blowpipe to blow onto the glowing embers on a few burned dry

leaves. The embers glowed brighter, flames appeared, and finally, a small fire spread to some small dry branches.

Once I judged that the fire was intense enough, I added pieces of split firewood. I watched until those began to ignite too. By that point, there were intense flames burning within the cast iron furnace.

That should do it.

I got to my feet with the help of my crutch, then I used the end of it to roll the remaining pieces of firewood away from the furnace—we'd be in trouble if the flames somehow spread.

It was hard to judge the amount of firewood. Too much would make the bath water boil. If the water temperature went above ninety degrees Celsius, we couldn't easily cool it back down with more cold water. We could leave the window open and wait, but that would take too long. Rather than cooling the water at all, it was better to use less firewood. If it wasn't hot enough, we could easily add more firewood later.

Now that the water was heating up, I walked around the house and headed for the kitchen. I knew I'd find Carol there making food.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was almost 5 p.m. already. It wasn't quite dinnertime, but it wasn't far off.

Carol was busy cooking as I entered through the front door.

"How's it going?" I asked her.

"I'm managing fine. Oh... Are you hungry?" Carol looked unsure how to react.

"No, don't worry about me."

I looked over at the oven and saw she had a pot boiling. I couldn't tell what was inside based on the froth bubbling on the top, but the faint smell coming from it told me she was boiling meat with alcohol.

"I think it'll still be a while," she said.

"Okay. Want help with anything?"

"No, I'm good. I just have to let it simmer, so you can rest."

“All right, I will.”

I was exhausted after hauling the bucket out of the well over and over. If I was going to rest, it was best to do it near my post on the second floor.

The reconnaissance force would obviously need to see their surroundings, so they couldn't work at night. I was fairly sure they wouldn't arrive today because the sun would set in under an hour, but it wasn't totally dark yet. I couldn't be one hundred percent sure today wasn't the day.

I removed my shoes before leaving the area with earthen floors, then headed up to the second floor. After a little effort spent climbing the stairs, I headed into the study that I'd been using as an office.

I'd had an excuse to enter both Myalo's and Carol's former bedrooms since getting here, but I hadn't had a reason to visit the study yet. I opened the door and found the place looked the same as when I'd last been here.

When I looked at the shelf where the horn had once been, I noticed a piece of paper held down by an ornament that had originally been near the home's entrance. I picked up the paper and found that the Gudinveil family crest was drawn on it. Besides that, it was just ordinary paper. It was probably a hint for me in case I hadn't understood the clues downstairs. Myalo, as always, had been thorough.

I put the paper back down and took a look around the room before sitting down on the chair I'd always used in the past. The chair was comfortable enough that I could've fallen asleep on it. It was incredibly relaxing to sit here.

I absentmindedly looked out the window, as I had many times in the past. Then I realized something was different—a black object was hanging by the window.

Oh. The gallbladder.

I'd completely forgotten that I'd left it hanging to dry when I was last in the village.

I walked over to take it down. The bear's gallbladder had dried out in the air and lost most of its moisture, making it completely different from when I'd last seen it. It looked nothing like a leather waterskin now—the whole surface was

wrinkled. It was so black and shrunken that I almost hadn't recognized it.

After I'd removed it from the window latch that it had been hanging from, I felt it. It was still a little squishy, so I could tell that it hadn't completely solidified yet. With all the fluid dried up, it was soft, but not fragile enough to fall apart when cut. The texture reminded me of karasumi—a snack made by salting and drying a mullet fish's roe sack.

I wonder if it'll get any harder. But nothing's going to spill out if I rupture the membrane now. It should be good to eat...I think.

A bear's gallbladder was said to be beneficial to the digestive system. They were generally added to tea or cut into small pieces that were swallowed like pills before a meal.

Having just ended a long journey spent living on basic food, it felt like the perfect time to try something new.

I headed downstairs.

"Carol."

"Hm?"

I called out to Carol while she was skimming the scum from the pot, and the strange thing that I was holding by a string caught her eye.

"Oh, isn't that...?"

"The bear's gallbladder."

"I'd totally forgotten."

That makes two of us. Well, we have been through a lot.

"Me too. Supposedly, it's good for digestion if you eat it before a meal. That's why I've brought it down."

If it really would lighten the load on our stomachs, then we should've taken some before yesterday's meal too. Still, it was better late than never.

"Really? I can't wait to try it."

Carol's unexpected enthusiasm made me feel like I'd forgotten something else important.

Wasn't I looking forward to something too? I can't remember what. Now that's really going to bug me. Hmm...

"What's wrong?" Carol asked.

"Nothing... It just feels like I forgot something."

"Oh, really? Anyway, let's eat it now."

"What about your cooking?"

"I'm finished. It just needs to be served."

"Okay, then let's try the gallbladder right away. Pass me the knife and cutting board."

I put the black lump down on the cutting board, chopped off a small piece, then divided it into two. As expected, nothing came oozing out. I wrapped the rest of the gallbladder in a cloth, then put the pieces on a small plate. I also made sure we had some water to wash it down.

"You eat it like this? I thought we'd just bite pieces off."

"What? No."

I didn't know where she'd gotten that idea. She'd regret it big time if she tried eating it like that. This stuff was so bitter that you couldn't even chew it, let alone take off chunks. Biting into the whole thing sounded like some kind of a punishment.

"I think eating it that way would do you more harm than good."

"Really? Well, I'll follow your advice."

"Okay, let's swallow them," I said.

While still standing in front of the cutting board, I picked up a centimeter-long piece and threw it into my mouth before washing it down with a gulp of water.

Even when swallowing it whole like this, the bitter taste on my tongue was intense, just like I remembered it.

"Uegh!"

The noise I heard beside me was indescribable. The closest thing I could

compare it to was the dying cry of a small bird.

I turned and saw Carol making a face like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was like she'd just experienced some incredible shock. The sight filled me with an inexpressible sense of satisfaction.

Suddenly, it hit me. *Oh, right. I was going to prank her. I kinda remember telling her that it was sweet like candy. I'd totally forgotten.*

"Mgh!"

I had to resist the urge to burst out laughing as Carol clasped her hands over her mouth.

"Uh, are you okay? If you want to throw up, go ahead..."

"Nnngh." Carol teared up while shaking her head, her hand still over her mouth. For someone like me, it was an entertaining sight.

I'd swallowed mine quickly, but she must've tried to savor the taste. If she crushed it between her back teeth, it would've been even worse.

"D-Drink this." I passed her the cup of water I'd just used, which was still half full.

Carol appeared to be in a daze as she grabbed the cup, took some water into her mouth, then spat it back out again. Then she took another big mouthful and swished it around in her mouth before spitting again.

"What *is* that thing?!" she yelled while wiping the corner of her mouth.

She was breathing heavily and glaring at the gallbladder wrapped in cloth. It seemed she still wasn't thinking clearly enough to direct her hate at me rather than the horribly bitter thing she'd just eaten.

"I swallowed it... Was it poisonous?" She sounded worried, like she was turning to me for advice.

"No... It's safe to eat."



Phew. Calm down. Calm down. It's not all that funny. It's not worth laughing about.

"But...it must've gone rotten. Maybe I should make myself throw up...?"

"Ah... Pfft, haaah... I forgot to tell you. They always taste bitter."

"Huh?" Carol looked at me with disbelief.

"When I said it was sweet, I was lying."

Carol's face suddenly became menacing. "What? Say that again."

"I lied and told you it was sweet when it's actually bitter. Sorry."

"You know I could've had a heart attack?"

"I forgot that I'd said it. I only just remembered."

"But why? Why trick me like that?"

"I didn't... It was true about it being good for digestion. I forgot that I'd lied earlier."

"So you *did* trick me."

Oh crap. Now she's mad.

I really *had* tricked her. There was no talking my way out of it.

There was only one thing I could say. "Sorry."

"Apologize."

Um. Didn't I just do that? Well, I guess I can do better.

"I'm really sorry," I said.

Now that I'd apologized three times in total, the rage faded from Carol's face.

Oh, good. I'm glad she didn't make me say it a hundred times.

"How can you even mess around at a time like this?" she asked.

Her anger might have faded, but now she was disappointed in me.

"Well... Things weren't so bad back when I'd lied about it."

She glared at me. "Don't give me any excuses."

“Sorry...”

“Ngh... Well, if you’re sorry, let’s just forget about it and eat.”

“Okay.”

“Ah,” Carol said, like she’d suddenly remembered something.

“Hm?”

Did the pot boil over?

“Uh, ah... You...” she stuttered.

“What?”

“That’s right. You did a bad thing, so you should...c-compensate me.”

“‘Compensate’?”

That’s an odd choice of word. What’s she even mean?

“When I take a bath, you have to...w-w-w-wash my back for me.”

The thick slices of beef stewed in beer were truly delicious. The meat juices spilled out as I bit into it, mixing with the broth. The meat was so tender that it almost fell apart in my mouth.

I felt my wounds would heal in no time with food like this.

The moment I finished the last bite, my mouth began to miss the taste and I was a bit sad that I’d finished it all.

“Thanks for that,” I said as I was done.

“How was it?”

“Really great,” I replied honestly.

“Glad to hear it. Now...”

“What is it?”

“Here.” Carol put a cup of yesterday’s unbelievably awful tea in front of me.

Ah... This stuff...

“This again...?”

It's worse when I know what to expect. This stuff's vile...

"It's good for you."

"O-Okay. I'll drink it."

I did make her eat the gallbladder...

I picked up the cup and drank it down in one go. It made my head swim. The aftertaste of the meal I'd just eaten was completely washed away.

"Ugh."

"That settles it. You're going to bathe first."

What do you mean, "that settles it"? Though she's still eating, I suppose.

"I'll j-join you soon," she added.

I dipped a hand into the bath water and found that it had heated up nicely. The temperature was just right.

After pouring a bucket of water over myself to wash away the dirt, I scrubbed my whole body with a wet cloth, tightened up the bandage on my foot, and got into the tub.

Hot water was seeping into the bandage, but it didn't hurt much. That might've been thanks to the ointment. Otherwise, letting my body soak felt incredible. It was like all the fatigue I'd been carrying was melting away. The sheer bliss made it hard to hold back a sigh of satisfaction.

"I'm c-coming in," said a voice from outside the room.

The door opened before I could reply. Through the clouds of steam, I heard Carol enter.

"I got in first," I said.

"Y-Yeah, I'll get in too, but I'll wash myself first."

Obviously. She's nervous, I guess. Of course she is. Me too, for that matter.

"Should I close my eyes?" I asked.

"Uh, if you don't mind... Actually, no, you can look."

“I’d better not. I don’t want to make you slip with that bad leg.”

I draped a wet towel over the top half of my face, then lay back in the large bathtub.

Beside me, I heard the sound of a stool being placed on the ground. I knew Carol had sat down.

The hot water really did feel good. The mayor must’ve really splurged when he got himself a bathtub big enough to stretch out his legs. Filling it each time must’ve been a challenge.

I heard Carol washing her body. Meanwhile, I was relaxing as I waited.

“I’m d-done. Would you wash my back?”

“Got it.”

I got out of the bath and looked at Carol through the steam. She was sitting down and leaning forward slightly, her towel covering the front of her body.

I wrung out a towel soaked with hot water as I approached, then I touched her back.

“Ah!” she shrieked.

“Too hot?” I asked.

“N-No, it’s fine... Keep going.”

“All right.”

I began to scrub. Her back was beautiful, covered in firm muscle. It hardly needed cleaning at all—I wasn’t removing any dirt. She’d probably washed it in preparation the night before.

To finish, I poured water over her back to rinse it.

“Okay. I’m done,” I said.

“Okay. Now...let’s get in.”

“All right. Can I get in first?”

“O-Okay. I’ll get in after you.”

We both sounded awkward.

Carol didn't have a cast on her leg to support it, so we had to do things carefully. Our situation would get even worse if she somehow sprained her ankle again.

I got back into the bath and closed my eyes. I heard Carol climbing in after me. The bath wasn't big enough to provide the two of us a lot of space. We sat facing each other, our legs crossed.

The water level had dropped as we'd used it to wash ourselves, but it still slightly overflowed now that we were both inside.

I opened my eyes as I heard it spill over. Carol was covering her chest and lower regions with her legs and hands. I knew the heat of the water wasn't the only thing making her face red.

"Y-You're pretty bold," she said.

"We're going to do it later, aren't we? No point in hiding things."

"Is that how it works? Sh-Should I be showing..."

"No, you can keep yourself covered up."

"Ah."

If we weren't planning to sleep with each other that night, I wouldn't have encouraged her to cover herself. But if she remained a little bashful, it might've helped to turn me on later. I didn't want to pass that up.

"Um... How come you're so calm? You're not interested in my body...? Is something wrong with it?"

How can she be worried about that? She couldn't be more wrong.

"It's not that. You look amazing. It's turning me on."

I'd give Carol's body something close to a perfect score. She was well proportioned and beautiful without being overly slim. Some people might've said she was a little too toned, but I'd have to disagree with them. The size of her breasts wasn't an issue either—I considered shape more important than size.

My ability to stay calm came partly from my advanced age. I was also making

a conscious effort not to get excited because I didn't want my body to react in certain ways just yet.

"It is?"

"If you change your mind now, it's going to drive me crazy later when I think about what I saw in here."

"Huh? I'm not going to do that."

"But you can still back out if you want. You don't have to feel pressured into anything."

Though I'd be devastated.

"Huh...?"

"You've got your future to think about... If you have a change of heart, just say so."

"Yuri, you don't have to be so careful. Whatever happens...I'm not going to regret it."

If she says that, I guess she means it. I guess I should stop worrying too.

If Carol wanted it, then it made no sense for me to keep discouraging her. I was dying to do it too. I had no reason to put her off now. All things considered, we didn't have to attach much significance to anything we did. We might not live another day. Even if it resulted in me marrying her later, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

"Okay. I won't hold my feelings back, then."

"You're holding back?" Carol looked surprised.

"I'm a man. And now I'm done fussing over whether we're doing something we shouldn't. I know I've acted reluctant, but I've wanted to do it the whole time."

"Huh...? You did?"

"Of course I did. I'm not some old man who's lost interest in sex. In fact, you wouldn't believe how badly boys my age want it."

"Uh..." Carol seemed to recoil from me. She pressed her hands closer to her

body, as if trying to protect herself. “I was hoping you’d be...g-gentle...”

Something about the way she did that got to me. It was like she had a grip on the part of my brain that connected directly to my lower body. There was no use trying not to get excited now, and there was no longer a reason to hold back either.

“Wanna get started right here?”

“Huh? N-Now? B-But I’m not ready...”

“Don’t worry—I just mean foreplay.”

“F-Foreplay...? Wh-What’s that?”

Ah... I need to explain even the basics.

“It’s kind of like...a warm-up before we get to the real thing. Turn around and get closer to me.” I felt a slight sense of urgency, and it was making me sound a little demanding.

“Huh...? Uh... O-Okay.”

Carol did just as I’d asked. She seemed confused, but turned her back to me anyway. Even this simple action was somehow seductive and elegant. She couldn’t have moved like this if she wasn’t sophisticated down to her core.

Carol sat back down in the bathtub with a splash.

“I’m going to touch you,” I said as I reached out for Carol’s waist.

“Ngh... Ah... Haa, haa...”

Small tremors ran through Carol’s body as she leaned back against me. Her hands were clasped around both of my arms as they explored her body, urging me to keep going. Her breathing was heavy, and I felt additional heat where my skin touched hers. My body was already quite warm by the bath water, but she was hotter.

“Fwah...” Carol sighed, like the heat was almost too much.

“Is that enough for you?”

“Hah...? You’re stopping already...?” Carol turned her flushed face sideways to view my face in profile.

“You’re going to overheat and pass out if we keep this up.”

“I don’t care. Keep going.”

I suspected her head was a little hazy already.

“We can save the rest for the real thing. Come on. Let’s go to the bedroom.”

“Ugh... Okay.”

I left the bathroom and entered the bedroom first. Carol appeared a few moments later with her body tightly wrapped in a towel and her crutch under her arm.

The relaxed look on her face suggested that the passion from earlier hadn’t left her completely.

The sun had set, and it was dark outside. The light cast on us was from two lanterns.

Carol was simply standing there, silent—she probably didn’t know what to do. She seemed so inexperienced now that it was hard to believe how pushy she’d been the day before yesterday. But this *was* her first time, after all.

I wouldn’t have to make any awkward attempts at helping her relax, though, because her tension had faded while we were in the bathroom.

I rose from where I’d been sitting on the edge of the bed and reached out my hand. Carol came close and grasped it.

I pulled her in gently, spun us around, then pushed her onto the bed.



“Ahh!” she shrieked as I made her sit.

I pushed her down, and my lips met hers.

We had no more use for words.

IV

It was two days later, during the daylight hours, when we heard a great crashing sound.

I rose from where I’d been waiting in the second-floor study and hurried to the window, using a wooden staff to support myself.

I peered through the wide-open window and saw what appeared to be five cavalymen who’d halted at the entrance to the village.

They’d stopped to calm their horses, which had been understandably spooked by the loud sound of the rock suddenly hitting the assortment of metal items.

I fought to calm my racing heart as I blew as hard as I could on a whistle, which had been ready for me in this room.

The shrill peep would surely be heard by the enemy, but since this plan required coordination between me and Carol, I needed a surefire way to alert her. Indeed, the five men looked right at me when they heard the whistle.

I picked up the bow that I’d prepared. I’d found it in a house that looked like it belonged to a hunter. Unlike the shortbow I’d used before, this was a longbow designed for hunting wild beasts—its range was far greater.

The bow creaked as I drew it tight. Then I unleashed an arrow, aiming slightly above my target.

The arrow followed a curved trajectory before embedding itself in the ground some distance away from the riders. I wasted no time before nocking another arrow and firing it. I unleashed a series of arrows that all hit the ground, one after another.

I was too far away to hear them speak, but it appeared that their captain gave an order. Four of the men came charging at me.

My weak attempt at an attack suggested that they'd be able to eliminate me without trouble, so the scouts would try to do just that. However, having one scout hold back meant that there'd be someone who could flee and inform others if things didn't go as they expected.

The approaching cavalymen handled their horses with considerable skill. They advanced toward me while meandering slightly, making themselves difficult targets for my bow. In no time at all, they covered the distance from one end of the village to the other, closing the space between us and arriving in front of the mayor's house.

But no rider, no matter how skilled, could search a building on horseback. They dismounted, then tied the reins around something to tether their horses and stop them from running off. Needless to say, there were places for visitors to leave their horses right outside the house.

After they'd spent just a moment dismounting and tethering their horses, the cavalymen kicked down the front door. That shouldn't have been necessary—it wasn't locked—but they must've assumed it would be.

When I heard their thumping footsteps on the first floor, I threw down my bow and arrows and turned around. They knew that the archer was on the second floor, so they'd be coming straight for me while proceeding with some caution.

I walked across the house to a rear window, where a rope had been tied to a spot above it. The other end had been tied near the bottom of a tree trunk a short distance from the house.

I blew the whistle once more as a signal to Carol, then picked up a sturdy-looking pair of pants that had been prepared ahead of time. I placed it over the rope.

I leaped from the windowsill, launching myself through the air. There was a zipping sound as I descended rapidly to the ground. I hit the pile of straw at the landing point, knees first, then spun around to look at the window.

If a soldier came to the window, I planned to cut the rope immediately to stop them from following me down. But before anyone appeared, I heard a muffled *pow!*

The sound was surprisingly quiet because it was mostly absorbed by the earth. But despite the lack of loudness, it made the ground beneath me tremble for a few moments.

I heard wood splintering as timbers gave way throughout the entire building.

The rapid expansion of gas within the basement simultaneously destroyed all of the beams that supported the structure, causing the house to collapse inward as it fell into the basement. The whole thing came down. As I'd predicted, it came falling toward me, so I had to crawl behind the tree to take cover.

There was a great roar as air and small pieces of debris grazed my face. I waited a few seconds before emerging from behind my hiding spot to view the mountain of wreckage.

There was no way the four men inside were going to walk away without serious injuries. But just to be sure, I picked up the spear and the crutch that I'd left in this spot. If anyone came crawling out, I'd be ready to stab them.

I made my way to the basement's entrance using the crutch. I found Carol lying there, face-down on the ground and covered in dust.

I crouched beside her, rolled her onto her back, and shook her. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Ngh..."

Carol had entered the basement on my first whistle, then on my second whistle, she'd ignited the gunpowder and escaped via the basement's main entrance.

I could tell that the basement's sturdy door had been blown clean off by the explosion. Carol might've been thrown back by the surprising power of the blast just after she'd barred the door shut.

"Ugh... Ngh..."

"Hey. Wake up."

There was a chance she'd hit her head on something, but sadly I had no time to check whether she was injured.

“Uh... Ah. Ah! Did it work?!”

As her consciousness came back, she quickly remembered what was happening. It seemed she'd be just fine.

“I don't know. Can you walk?”

Carol had just barely held on to her crutch.

“Of course. Are the horses all right?”

“I don't know yet.”

I looked toward the front entrance. As the clouds of dust were steadily dispersed by the breeze, I could just about make out the horses—still tethered, but whinnying repeatedly.

If the horses were fine, everything was going to plan.

The earthen floors were generally near the front entrance, and those areas had no basement beneath. When the explosion made the basement ceiling cave in, it resulted in the house collapsing toward the rear. That meant the horses were likely to be unscathed. Still, since the building in front of them had loudly collapsed, they'd be shocked and agitated.

“They look fine,” I said. “Let's go.”

“Okay.”

I took Carol's hand and pulled her to her feet.

We passed by the wreckage and hurried to the horses. We found them as restive as I'd expected. Our injured legs wouldn't cause us much trouble while riding, but I wasn't ready to try holding an unruly horse down by its reins.

“There, there,” I said to one of the horses. I pulled on its reins while it was still tied in place.

Calm down. Please calm down.

The horse kept on whinnying; it refused to settle down.

When it came to birds, I knew how to look them in the eye to reassure them and quickly put them at ease. Unfortunately, it wasn't working on this horse.

Looks like we'll just have to be patient.

"Th-There, there." Beside me, Carol pulled on a horse's reins and imitated me.

Her horse took to her better than mine, perhaps because she appeared less aggressive. The horse appeared to grow calm as she talked to it. That seemed to cause a chain reaction that made my horse begin to relax too.

"You try getting on first," I urged Carol.

Carol's horse no longer looked like it was ready to buck off anyone who attempted to climb onto its back. It would be difficult to control, but Carol could handle it once she was in the saddle.

"All right."

Carol went to the horse's left side and put a foot in the stirrup. Then, with her crutch still in her hand, she jumped up onto its back.

After monitoring the horse's reaction for a moment, I untied the tethered reins. It seemed the horse wasn't about to thrash around, so I passed the reins to Carol.

My own horse was calm now, so I drove my long spear into the ground, untied the reins, and climbed onto its back. It seemed a little uneasy, but it kept its cool to some extent—just about what someone might expect from a war horse.

"Let's go." I pulled on the reins to turn the horse around to face the village entrance.

I narrowed my eyes. The remaining scout was still by the village entrance, unmoving.

Why? Doubts formed in my mind. Why didn't he run? Is he just stupid? What if he never was a scout? Could he be part of a bigger unit?

I had no answers. This whole situation had to be completely unexpected for him. In his mind, the biggest threat to his allies would've been a rain of arrows showering down from all directions, or enemies that charged out of every house to surround them and hack them to pieces. But there were just two enemies, and his allies had disappeared under a collapsing house.

If I were in his shoes, I would've turned to run immediately, no matter how confusing I found the situation. That way, he would've still completed his original mission. It seemed he had other ideas, however.

Perhaps he was considering looking for his allies after the two of us had left. It was definitely possible. Or perhaps he was luring us into a trap. It was possible that there was a large force behind him, and we were about to head into an ambush. But the enemy wouldn't need to set up something like that, and they wouldn't have sent four men charging in beforehand if that were the case.

Another possibility was that he couldn't handle the pressure. Maybe he was an inexperienced or talentless soldier. It might've been why he'd been the one chosen to hold back.

All of these possibilities came to mind, but I still didn't understand why he hadn't run. In the end, it didn't matter. If we didn't seize this opportunity, we'd never get another chance. With all of our precious gunpowder used up, we couldn't defeat more soldiers the same way. Our only option was to break through whatever lay ahead.

The only real question was whether we should kill him, but the answer was obvious—it'd be better for us if he never reported what he'd seen here.

I pulled my spear out of the ground and looked at him once more. "It could be a trap, but we don't have a choice."

"Okay." Carol had noticed the remaining scout too.

"If my horse falls, ignore me and keep going."

"No," Carol shot back.

"That's an order. Don't argue. Now, follow me."

Without waiting for her to reply, I spurred my horse forward. While keeping a loose grip on the reins, I struck its sides with my feet. The horse began to walk at a comfortable pace.

That was when I realized that I didn't have any spurs on my shoes. They were usually placed on the heels and used for pressing into the horse's side. That ensured the horse received clear instructions. Birds were so sensitive that spurs

weren't needed, but they were important when riding horses...albeit not strictly necessary.

I held the spear in one hand as we drew close.

The remaining scout finally decided on a course of action. He turned his horse around and began fleeing back along the road he'd taken here.

He's not getting away.

I kicked my horse's side hard. It began to run faster. I felt my waist rise and fall with its rhythmic galloping, and then we were going so fast that the wind began to feel harsh against my cheeks.

I hadn't felt exhilaration like this in some time. But just as we exited the village, the horse slowed down and returned to a comfortable trot.

Damn. This is harder than I thought.

Riding a horse, much like riding a plainrunner, required a level of understanding between the animal and the person. A horse wasn't a machine that would follow whatever instructions I inputted. It'd probably been trained a little differently from Shiyaltan horses too. Everything felt awkward. I wasn't one with the horse.

Still, awkward or not, I had to make it run. I kicked the horse's side with my right foot as hard as I could. At the very least, I could keep spurring it on. The horse increased its speed and began to sprint once more.

I'd only lost a little time, but it had been enough for my target to put a considerable distance between us. He was also handling his horse with much more skill. This was his job, after all.

Even when I got my horse to gallop, the enemy was still getting further away. The difference in skill meant that he could get his horse to run significantly faster than mine.

Having missed the chance for a quick victory, there was no way I could catch up with him now. After a few minutes racing after him, he'd gotten so far from me that I could just barely see him on the straight road ahead.

This is hopeless. I can't finish him off.

But then something unexpected happened. Ahead of the scout I was chasing, a tiny dot came into view that I recognized as another rider.

It wasn't just a slow-moving horse that we'd caught up with—this new figure was charging toward me at high speed, rapidly closing the distance.

So it was a trap.

I glanced back and saw that Carol wasn't far behind me. We had to keep charging forward. Trap or not, we'd break through.

I kept the speed of my horse constant while tightening my grip on the spear.

Ahead, I saw the scout and the mysterious rider cross paths. An instant later, the scout fell from his horse like he'd been hit. His horse continued running ahead, leaving the rider behind as his back hit the ground. There was a spear embedded in his chest.

Who is that...?

Then, the mystery rider pulled on their reins and violently brought their horse to an abrupt halt.

I didn't understand what had happened. I couldn't grasp the situation. But as long as I couldn't tell whether this was a friend or foe, the safest option was to kill them. Coming to a stop was a risk I couldn't take.

As I approached, the rider went from being the size of my fingertip to the size of my open palm in my vision. I was close enough now to see their Kulati clothing. I charged forward without slowing down. In mounted combat, whoever was charging with the most energy held an advantage.

Just when I'd lined up the spear point, intending to run the mystery rider through, they quickly took something out.

"Stop! I'm a friend!" the rider yelled in Shanish while holding the item up.

It was black and had a slight curve to it. I'd seen it before. I immediately shifted my spear off target while pulling the horse's reins to slow it down. Finally, I came to a stop right next to the fallen scout.

The rider was the royal sword.

Once Carol and I had both stopped, the royal sword immediately dismounted.

Now that I could see her face, I recognized her. She must've been close enough to hear the explosion in the house, so she'd hurried to us.

She was wearing armor that she must've stolen from a Kulati. Her surcoat was a finely tailored piece that she'd obviously gotten from a high-ranking noble.

The royal sword strode toward Carol, then hung her head. "Your Highness... I'm relieved to see you safe!"

She was bowing to Carol while completely ignoring me. I wasn't bothered by it at all, but Carol looked at me like she wanted instructions. Military rules were particular about things like this, so Carol didn't want to say anything without her superior's approval.

I gave Carol a nod.

"You've done well, Tillet."

So the royal sword's name was Tillet? No one ever told me.

"Your Highness... I can only apologize for my failure to rescue you sooner."

Needless to say, she didn't care about me. If I'd suddenly dropped dead while clutching my chest, her reaction would probably be, "Hmph, let's keep going."

"It was all thanks to Yuri," Carol replied.

The royal sword looked at me for the first time. Well, to be more precise, she scowled at me. I could guess she had a few things to say, but she wasn't about to speak her mind in front of Carol. I was fairly—no, one hundred percent—sure that she wasn't going to say anything nice.

I would've liked to have given her an excuse or two, but I couldn't deny that I'd been chiefly responsible for leading Carol into this situation. There was no use arguing. At least the person whose opinion really mattered—Carol's mother—was in no position to complain.

"Hey, can I say something?" I asked, speaking for the first time.

"What?" the royal sword shot back.

"You might think you've found us safe and well, but we've actually both

injured our legs so badly that we can't walk without a crutch. I hate to cut the touching reunion short, but..."

Getting off our horses was so difficult that we hadn't dismounted. Our situation had improved massively now the royal sword was here, but I wasn't about to get so optimistic that we let our guard down.

"Your Highness...you're injured?" the royal sword looked up at Carol with concern.

"Yeah. It happened when I crashed... Yuri's been carrying me on his back this whole time. But then just before we got here, he injured himself too. I know it's a lot to ask, but could you escort us the rest of the way?"

The royal sword appeared moved. "All the way here...?"

Maybe she'd thought we'd been so slow because we'd been wandering around lost. She couldn't have guessed the truth.

"We know the general situation from some letters Myalo left," I explained. "This area won't be safe for much longer... Especially not for someone with injured legs who can't run away."

We had horses, but we'd be easily stopped if they got hit by arrows, or if we found wagons placed in the road to block our path.

"Right... Now that Her Highness is with us, let's head straight for Reforme."

"We're counting on you," Carol said.

"Please leave it to me, Your Highness." The royal sword got to her feet and jumped back onto her horse.

Chapter 2 — In a Dying City

I

Two days later, the walls of Reforme came into view.

After we'd reached the walls with seemingly no effort, we found them still standing. There were no signs of a siege in progress. It was the same sight I'd seen in my dreams several times. I tried pinching my cheek.

Ouch.

The royal sword eyed me suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"I'll leave you now."

"What? Why?" Carol asked in surprise.

"The two of you can return together. My job is to protect you from the shadows, Your Highness."

"You're sure?" I asked the royal sword. What I meant was, *Don't you want any credit for saving Carol?*

Any ordinary knight would have to be awarded something for this great achievement, but not a royal sword. Since they behaved like secret police, they could never declare their achievements publicly or receive honors for them.

"If Her Majesty acknowledges my deeds, that's quite enough."

That's what I figured.

Her Majesty would see it as a better outcome if she could give all of the credit for saving Carol to me alone. Tillet would've guessed at Her Majesty's aims, but she didn't look disappointed. She acted like this was an obvious decision.

"Well, all right then," I said.

"Bye, Tillet. And thank you."

The royal sword gave us a bow, then galloped off toward Reforme. She'd probably enter before us and change into different clothes.

I looked at the plain that lay before Reforme, knowing it would soon be a battlefield. This had once been a forest, but it had become a vast field after the trees had been cut down for firewood and timber. Under the light of the spring sun, the thick undergrowth coated the ground like a carpet.

Ah, that's right. I'm free.

It felt like a weight had been lifted—like I'd just been cut loose from a chain that I hadn't realized I'd been wearing. My life was no longer in danger.

"Let's go," I said.

"Okay." Carol smiled cheerfully and nodded.

The area in front of the city gates was surprisingly deserted. The city gate must've been closed already. There'd be soldiers rushing around inside, but there was no long line of refugees filling the area.

If everyone had fled their homes the moment they'd learned that the fortress had fallen, the area wouldn't be so empty. It was possible that everyone had fled long before that had happened. Their readiness to flee suggested that they had a defeatist attitude toward the war. Now that the fortress had fallen and there was no longer a force large enough—or organized enough, for that matter—to thwart the enemy advance, however, the decision to flee appeared wise in hindsight.

As we tried to pass through the gate to enter the city, we were stopped by a voice. "Who goes there?!"

"Yuri Ho, captain of the Shiyaltan Special Observation Unit, and Carol Flue Shaltl, vice captain of the same."

"Shiyaltan Special...? Who's your superior?" the guard asked.

"I don't have one."

This was the only response I could give. I wasn't under anyone's command, nor did I report to a superior officer.

“Give me a minute...” the guard said.

Ugh... Well, I guess they have to be wary about spies.

Carol and I were both wearing clothes we’d found in Nikka Village, so we didn’t look like soldiers. Our names clearly hadn’t meant much to him either.

Let’s just do this the quick way.

“Hold on,” I stated. “Carol, lower your hood.”

“Okay.”

Carol’s blonde hair appeared from beneath her hood, eliciting a gasp from the guards. All eyes around us were focused on Carol’s head.

“As you can see, she’s a member of Shiyaltan royalty. I’m sure you don’t need further proof of identity.”

The effect was immediate. “N-No!”

“We were separated from our unit, but we’ve made it back. I’d like it if you could send out a bird to carry word to the royal castle.”

“Yes, Sir. We’ll send out a messenger pigeon right away.”

Since I wasn’t part of the chain of command, I wasn’t his superior, nor could I give him orders, but I was just going with the flow.

“See that you do. We’re coming through.”

“Yes, Sir!”

I passed through the gate like a VIP.

We avoided the main street as we explored the castle town and made our way forward.

The road that led from the city gate, through the castle town, and up to the royal castle was currently full of barricades, and the buildings on the road were sealed shut.

The people here were clearly prepared to continue fighting in the streets if they had to. We let our horses continue at a slow trot as we followed the road

signs. Along the way we saw people, presumably city dwellers, hard at work.

Are these people determined to stay?

There were few civilians here, making the streets look empty, but it wasn't completely deserted.

Once we'd reached the royal castle via a long detour, we found a particularly imposing crowd of people gathered inside the castle grounds. I recognized one of the faces. It was the prince consort—the husband of Her Majesty Queen of Kilhina.

He must've come rushing out after he'd seen the letter brought by the pigeon. Having a royal family present meant that there'd be more pomp involved, so in all honesty, I would've preferred it if he wasn't here. There was no use in complaining, though.

I slowly advanced forward on my horse before dismounting in front of the prince consort.

The situation meant that I couldn't just tell him something like, "Sorry, but I'll stay on my horse because I'm injured." I might've gotten away with it during peacetime, but the soldiers around us were already on edge at the thought of the looming battle for the city. I wasn't about to show disrespect for their commander.

I signaled with my hand to Carol, then endured the pain of getting off my horse. For a moment I had to put my weight on my left foot, sending pain shooting through it. Carol also got off her horse. Since she was equal, or perhaps even higher in status, to the prince consort, he was the one who had to be at her service. In other words, she could've stayed on the horse. However, it was important to let him take the lead here.

I made a point of supporting myself with my crutch as I walked, then lowered my head before His Majesty. I wasn't his retainer, his subordinate, or even a citizen of Kilhina, so hopefully I'd be forgiven for not kneeling before him.

"It's an honor to be met by His Majesty Prince Consort himself."

"You did well to make it back."

“My apologies for any concern I’ve caused. I became injured on the road, and...”

“It’s impressive you survived through such circumstances. Quite a display of bravery for someone your age, I must say.”

As much as I appreciated the compliment, he couldn’t have known what we’d just been through. We went missing, then came back. He wouldn’t have had many details beyond those. When he complimented me as if he knew what had happened, it was all a show for the soldiers around us.

Our return was good news in itself, and a bit of exaggerated praise to go with it would increase the soldiers’ morale. Basically, it was a show for an inferior army that needed to hear something positive. It was all just politics.

He didn’t need to know the particulars now because I’d give him a proper report later. It would be up to him whether to spread the information then.

“If you’re in need of treatment, I’d like to call a doctor for you.”

“If you would be so kind, I’ll gratefully accept your offer.”

“All right! Bring him a wheelchair!” the prince consort declared loudly.

Someone soon brought one to me. The person wheeling it was wearing a white coat covered with old bloodstains that couldn’t be washed out. Neither Shiyalta nor Kilhina had dedicated military physicians, so I guessed this was a doctor. Doctors were merely good at dressing wounds; they lacked an especially deep knowledge about diseases. Surgery was always a man’s job, while physicians were known as apothecaries, and the job was handled by women.

Given how dirty my wound was, I worried I might get an infection.

“Um... Please take a seat.” The doctor nervously presented the wheelchair to me.

“Could you please help her first? She’ll need your assistance.”

“Very well.” The doctor bowed to me, then walked over to Carol and offered to help her into the wheelchair.

While the crowd was distracted, the prince consort stepped closer to me and spoke in a quiet voice that only I could hear. “We’ll talk once you’ve rested. I’ll

send for you in six hours from now. Be ready.”



I was sitting on an incredibly comfortable couch while an aged surgeon examined my foot.

“Quite a nasty wound you’ve got... It’s not so big, but it won’t heal easily.”

“I fought against a skilled opponent while it was sewn up. Things got intense, and the stitches split open.”

“Oh, really...? I see.”

“I hope you’re not going to tell me I’m going to lose my foot after it rots.”

“No, that won’t happen. An infected wound is easy to recognize—pus oozes from wounds that aren’t healing. This one’s different. It *will* get better with time, but it won’t happen quickly. Since you’re young, your body’s healing powers will win out in the end.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” I replied honestly. “I applied this to it. Was that a good idea?” I showed him the ointment I’d been carrying.

“Oh. This is...the Yurumi family’s ointment. It’s meant for use with scrapes, but it’s good for stitched-up wounds too. It’s an effective treatment.”

“I guess I was lucky that I found it.”

“Yes, you were. By the way, when was this sewn up?”

“Umm, about four days ago.”

“I see... In that case, it should start to close soon. The bottom of the foot heals slowly, so please wait a week before taking out the stitches.”

“Don’t the stitches need redoing?”

Is the professional telling me that Carol sewed it well enough already?

“These stitches are a little too tight, but I see the wound was sewn up once, and then again for a second time by making new holes a little further from the wound. Sewing it a third time would be tricky. The wound’s held closed, so it’s best not to disturb it now.”

“I see.”

Well, the wound hasn't opened so far, so I'm sure it'll hold.

“The ointment you're using must be a good match for your skin, so please keep using it.”

“Okay. That's great.”

He hadn't really done anything for me, but just having a professional tell me that it would heal by itself gave me some peace of mind.

“Now, you must excuse me,” the surgeon said.

“All right. Thanks.”

He got up from his seat and spoke. “Please make it home safely. I'll be praying for your good health.”

“Ah... Yeah. I'll try to stay safe.”

I couldn't bring myself to wish him well in return. This aging doctor probably wouldn't get out of Reforme alive. This castle would be his final resting place. I couldn't find the words to say to someone in that predicament.

“Heh, I envy you Shiyaltans.” The surgeon bowed, then left the parlor.

“Seemed like a nice old man,” Carol said softly.

She was sitting in a chair in the same room, having been treated before me. Now that no one else was around to see her, she'd stopped sitting with her back perfectly straight. Instead, she relaxed and leaned against the chair's backrest, like she'd collapsed into it.

Being here in the castle must've put her in a bad mood. I understood why—the atmosphere here was gloomy and aggressive. I was equally eager to get out of this place.

“Why's this war even happening?”

It was an odd thing for her to ask.

“You're asking childish questions again?”

“I was thinking about it. Take Shiyalta, for example—Ho Province to the south

has the most fertile land. Meanwhile, there's barely anyone living in places like the region beyond the mountains that Liao's family owns, despite there being a picturesque gorge there."

The section of Rube Province beyond the mountains was covered in conifer forests and frozen soil, so it was true that barely anyone lived there. Villages *did* exist, but most were fishing settlements deep within the fjords, where people eked out a meager existence by making preserved food throughout summer to sustain them through the winter.

"The Kulati nations are all further south than Ho Province... Shouldn't most of them have soils that're more fertile than anything in Shiyalta or Kilhina? If a whole country was as fertile as Ho Province...wouldn't they already have more than they need?"

It probably wasn't just most of them—*all* of their nations were on land more fertile than ours, sadly. The Albio Republic was a cold place, but still not as cold as Shiyalta.

"You mean you can understand why the needy might steal from the rich, but not when it's the other way round?"

"I guess that's what I'm wondering about..."

"Stealing from someone else is generally easier than making things yourself. Steal from someone in the same country and you'll be punished for the crime of theft, but when the country itself does the stealing, that's harder to stop."

Many people had imagined systems of law enforcement to keep nations in line, and even put some into practice, but none of them had been successful. In every age, and in every world, international politics were always in a state of anarchy.

If Kilhina had been a completely barren wasteland, and if the Shanti people held no value as slaves, then it would be different. Unfortunately, this war would net the invaders some worthwhile spoils.

"You can accept it, then?" Carol asked.

"Well, yeah. The strong steal from the weak. It's no different from an eagle preying on a rat."

“So we have to let them eat us because we’re the weak rats?”

“That’s right. All we can do is complain about it when the time comes.”

“But that’s pointless.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“But... Maybe you’re right.”

Sadly, that really is how the world works.

“But it means that if we steal from them, we don’t have to listen to their complaints,” I added.

Carol didn’t respond. Feeling something was up, I looked over at her and saw she was looking back at me with a stiff expression.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing... I just thought of something that sent a chill down my spine.”

“What was it?”

“Never mind. It didn’t involve us,” Carol said.

I didn’t understand her, but we ended the discussion there.

I idly looked at my watch and saw it was 8 p.m. I’d already eaten, and I had another four hours until the time I’d arranged with the prince consort. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. I began to consider taking a nap.

Just then, I heard heavy footsteps out in the corridor. They came to stop right outside the door, which was then thrown open without so much as a knock. The small-framed girl who’d opened the door was standing there, doorknob in hand.

She looked like Myalo. No, she *was* Myalo. I hadn’t seen her face in so long. A sense of nostalgia filled me. As we looked at each other, Myalo’s stiff expression melted away.

“Yuri...”

“Myalo... I’m back.”

As I stood up from the couch to greet her, she came rushing over and hugged

me, hitting me with enough force to send me falling backward. I landed on the soft couch again. Even after I'd fallen, Myalo still didn't let go. Her face pressed against my chest.

"I'm going out for a minute." Carol stood up, picked up the new crutch she'd just been given, and left through the room's open door. She closed it behind her.

"Yuri, Yuri, Yuri..." Myalo's voice was muffled as she called my name over and over.

I stroked her hair. "You did well, Myalo."

"Ugh... I thought I was...going to die of worry," she sobbed.

"Yes, but I'm back unharmed now."

Except for my foot.

"I'm so glad... Truly..."

"Yep."

I'm glad I made it. It was worth all the effort it took to get back here.

For a while, I continued holding her like that and stroking her hair. I felt my stomach grow wet as her tears soaked through my clothes and onto my skin.

I really made her worry.

"Have you calmed down now?" I asked.

"Ah, yes..."

"Okay."

"Um..." Myalo looked up at me with her arms still wrapped around my abdomen. "This isn't...a dream, is it?"

I pinched Myalo's cheek.

"Shtop thaaaat."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeees."

I let go of her cheek. “Well, if it hurts, it can’t be a dream.”

“Really...? Ah, I’m s-sorry.”

Myalo let go of me. She seemed to have returned to her senses.

“Four times...I had dreams about you coming home. I felt so disappointed each time I woke up...”

Four? That’s a lot. Then again, I had three myself.

“I see... I read your letters in Nikka, by the way.”

“Ah... Huh? You read them?”

“Yeah. They helped us a lot. It was thanks to you that we found a way to steal horses.”

“They really did...? I’m so glad. Um, what about the letter on the second floor...?”

Letter on the second floor? What? There was another letter?

“You mean the piece of paper you left where the horn used to be? The one with a Gudinveil crest on it?”

“Ah, um, not quite...”

So not that one.

I’d examined it more closely later, but it had only been her family crest, so it wasn’t really a letter.

“Sorry, I didn’t find it.”

“That’s fine! That’s fine! Honestly, it didn’t say anything important anyway...”

“We blew up the whole house with the gunpowder in the basement, so it’s buried in the wreckage now.”

“Oh... That’s a relief.”

Myalo looked a little disappointed for some reason. I had to wonder what the letter said.

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“No, I’m just glad that you came back to me.”

“Well, you made the right choice to get out of Nikka. And you took good care of things while I was gone.”

“No... If Liao hadn’t been there—if it was just me—I couldn’t have kept everything under control.”

“I’m sure the only reason he made rational decisions was because he had you with him.”

Myalo held no sway over the other unit members. If she was alone, they’d simply laugh at her, making it impossible for her to lead. Meanwhile, Liao’s birthright, his status, and his personality made him a likely target for admiration from other knights. Still, that didn’t mean Myalo was any less competent than Liao.

“Now maybe you could tell me what became of the unit.”

“Ah... I’m sorry, but it all became a mess.”

“That’s fine. I’d be upset if you told me that you all went on operating like machines.”

Since Myalo had hugged me, I’d been filled with an inexpressibly warm feeling. It was like I was back where I belonged.

“Carol, come back in,” I called in a slightly raised voice.

Carol reentered the room from where she’d been waiting outside the door. She looked unhappy, for some reason.

“Your Highness, I’m glad you’re safe... I’m relieved.”

Myalo straightened herself up and greeted Carol.

“Yeah... I’m glad to see you’re okay too, Myalo.”

“Hm?” Myalo looked at Carol with a look of confusion, like she sensed there was something different about her.

“Carol, Myalo, sit down,” I said.

“Okay,” they both agreed.

Two of us were on the couch and the other took the chair.

“We’re missing a member, but let’s have a leadership meeting anyway,” I said.

“Liao’s currently locating all the unit members. There could be confusion if we realize someone’s missing later.”

I didn’t need to hear about the state of the unit just yet. I decided I’d let Myalo know about my own situation before asking her to bring me up to date.

“When I arrived a while ago, the prince consort said he’d like to speak to me. That’ll be...” I looked at my watch. “...in about three hours. I can’t leave without talking to him. Naturally, I couldn’t say no. Given her high status, I’d like Carol there too.”

It would likely be Carol’s last chance to meet with the Kilhinan royal family. It would be incredibly rude if someone in her position visited the castle, but only gave a brief greeting to the prince consort and spent no time with the queen. I couldn’t let that happen.

“I see. In any case, the unit won’t be ready to withdraw until tomorrow. I’m hoping we can set out early in the morning,” Myalo replied.

“All right. Once this meeting’s over, I’d like you to go back and begin those preparations.”

“Roger that.”

Myalo really didn’t need any instruction from me when it came to things like this.

“The other thing is that Carol and I have injured legs, which means we can’t run.”

“Injuries...? But you can still ride birds and horses, can’t you?”

“That’s right. We each need to carry a crutch, and someone will probably have to help us mount and dismount.”

“That’s a relief. Oh, but there won’t be any long-term effects, I hope?”

“Probably not.”

“Well then... Could I hear a little about what happened after the crash?”

“Are you asking out of curiosity?”

Now didn't feel like the right time to recount everything that had happened.

“It's not an urgent matter, but...I'm sure it'll be the main thing on the minds of other unit members. I think it's worth having something to tell them.”

That's a fair point.

As the leaders, our minds were constantly occupied by thoughts about the near future. Most soldiers, however, were different. The first thing they'd want to ask Myalo about would be the crash. Besides, we didn't want to give anyone a chance to make up their own wild stories.

“I'll give you a brief summary then.”

“Okay.” Myalo's eyes lit up like she couldn't wait to hear it.

I'm going to have to tell this story over and over to countless people, aren't I?

“When we crashed, Carol had sprained her ankle so badly that she couldn't walk, so I had to carry her on my back to Nikka Village. We got your letters there about...five days ago. Then we waited a few days for scouts to arrive on horseback. We lured them into the mayor's house, blew them up along with it, and stole their horses. Then the royal sword heard the sound and came rushing to us... That's about it.”

It really was a quick summary.

“But how'd you injure your foot?”

“The fires we'd set from our kingeagles really rubbed the enemy the wrong way. I injured my foot fighting some of the soldiers who chased us.”

“From what I've heard, Count Drain's force was pursuing you. Two hundred of his men, I hear.”

She doesn't miss much.

Count Drain. He was the man Canka had sworn fealty to. I remembered the name. I'd originally heard it after capturing someone and essentially torturing them for information.

“How’d you know about that?” I asked.

“Well, um... I was planning to inform you later, but we were searching for you along the coast. We captured a scout from the Peninsula Kingdom who turned out to be part of the unit searching for you. We got the information from him.”

Similarly to me, she’d gotten the information by attacking enemy soldiers and taking a prisoner. I didn’t know what they’d done to him, but apparently they’d made him talk.

“So you did some fighting?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Did we lose anyone?”

“No. But we did lose two plainrunners, and three members were injured.”

“Badly injured?”

“Some arrow wounds, bruises, and broken bones. Nothing worse. No one lost any limbs.”

“Okay...”

“Are you angry?”

Angry?

As Myalo asked this unexpected question, she showed no sign of remorse or regret. She clearly wasn’t asking me to forgive her for doing the wrong thing. She must’ve had to make some difficult decisions, and now she wanted me to affirm her choices.

“No, not if no one died. But I’d like more details.”

“It was an outlet for our frustrations... I knew we wouldn’t accomplish anything.”

If the unit members had nothing to do except wait, I could imagine how some might lose patience and do something stupid. The unit was originally formed from elite Knight Academy students who’d signed up voluntarily. Each member had an unusually high level of self-importance and a keen sense of justice. Such people wouldn’t be content to sit around wringing their hands. They’d want to

do something.

“Did Liao see it the same way?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s fine... Hastily assembled units like ours need a way to keep busy.”

If a real military unit behaved that way, they’d be a laughingstock. But if they’d gotten through it all with no more than minor injuries, it was thanks to Myalo and Liao working hard to keep everyone on a tight leash. If Liao had let himself be influenced by the passion of other members and grown reckless himself, the injuries they’d suffered could’ve been far worse. If our unit had gotten into a fight with a real enemy unit, a significant number of students would’ve died. In fact, they’d probably be wiped out completely.

“That’s right. I’m ashamed to say it, but it was the only way we could keep the unit under control.”

“Okay, I’ll hear the rest of the details later. I’ll finish my own story first.”

I could ask about happenings within the unit another time, but Myalo needed to hear my story right now.

“Very well. So...how determined was their pursuit?”

“The number of men actually tracking us was, um...eleven in total. Thirteen if you include the two who came earlier.”

“I’m surprised you outpaced them.”

“We didn’t. I had Carol on my back, after all.”

The whole reason I’d chosen to stay within the forest was because we couldn’t outpace anyone.

“Um... How many did you eliminate?”

“Let’s see...” I counted in my head. “Nine, ten... Then if I include the guy I killed before that...” I counted on another five fingers as I included the four scouts and the dragon rider. I’d certainly killed my fair share. “Fifteen people.”

“Fifteen people...? You always impress.”

“Nothing impressive about it.”

Myalo’s reaction was a mixture of happiness and surprise. Her feelings were quite different from mine.

“Oh, but...”

“I’m not proud of how many I killed. I’m not a thug.”

I didn’t feel good about it. If I’d felt patriotic feelings or a sense of attachment toward Kilhina, I might’ve felt hatred toward the enemy, and revenge would’ve made me feel better. That wasn’t the case, though—I’d killed because I had to. There was no satisfaction in it.

“But in war, it’s something to be honored.”

“I’m not proud of it.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll be praised for it, and the Ho family will act proud. That’s what makes it different from thugs killing each other in the street.”

“Maybe...”

I got what Myalo was saying, but I didn’t feel that way. Perhaps it was because I’d once lived in a world where soldiers weren’t lauded for killing people during war. Still, Myalo’s argument was no less correct—the news that I’d successfully killed fifteen people would be a source of pride for the Ho family.

“On the other hand, it’s impressive that you’re not boastful. There’s no denying that,” she added.

I got the impression that Myalo thought little of people who got full of themselves after a display of violence.

“Well, you can choose how to tell the others what happened. Just make sure it doesn’t make me sound bad. We don’t want a rebellion on our hands.”

Needless to say, Myalo would give them just the right impression.

“Very well. I think you’ve given me more than enough to work with,” she replied.

“Now, if you’ve heard enough of my story, I want to hear about our current

situation.”

“Very well,” Myalo said. “Sorry for going off topic. First, I’ll tell you what we know about the enemy.”

“Please do,” I replied.

“Based on the rate of the enemy’s advance, their main force will reach Reforme in four days. It’ll take them another day to position their forces and encircle us, so a full-scale attack on the city will likely happen in six days from now.”

They’ll be here in four days...?

“Where do these numbers come from?”

“From Kilhina’s army—they have the most eagles in the air. Right now, three of Kilhina’s four chieftain families are holed up in Reforme where they’re effectively under the prince consort’s command. The remaining family has entered Quonam while acting independently.”

“Quonam? Then won’t the enemy need to conquer that city first?”

Quonam could be reached by taking the road north from Reforme. The risk of being attacked from behind would prevent any army stationed here from safely encircling Reforme.

Reforme was a coastal city that had several roads leading to it, so even an attack from two different directions wouldn’t be enough to cut off their escape route or supply lines. Still, the Kulati wouldn’t want to have enemies at their back.

“They’ve dispatched a detachment to handle that. The Euphos Federation’s forces are headed to the city. It seems they merely intend to suppress Quonam rather than capture it, because they aren’t carrying siege weapons.”

“Sounds like the enemy’s in an enviable position.”

“Indeed.”

To defeat a force stationed in a castle, an attacking force of three times the size was needed. Obviously, that didn’t hold true if the aim wasn’t to storm the castle at all. If Quonam attempted to dispatch reinforcements to Reforme, their

soldiers could be fought after they'd left the castle gates, thus taking the battle to open ground.

Even if that were to happen, however, the Kulati would need a sizable force to ensure victory against the army stationed in the city. If the force advancing on Reforme could spare that many soldiers, it suggested they had ample resources.

"Well, it doesn't have anything to do with us," I said. "We can follow the coast to Honon from Meshal, then cross Hoto Bridge into Rube Province. We don't need to use any roads heading toward Quonam."

It was standard to follow the coast when traveling by land from Reforme to Rube Province. Merchants who lacked ships made the journey frequently, so the roads were designed to handle wagons.

We'd simply follow the coast and cross a large bridge known as Hoto Bridge. There were two bridges that spanned the river that separated Rube Province from Kilhina. The one that I'd visited while preparing for our expedition was the Zuck Bridge located upstream, but Hoto Bridge was much wider.

"Hoto Bridge is so congested that we'll be forced to wait three days before we can cross," Myalo warned. "I'd recommend heading upstream to the Zuck Bridge."

"Three days? How'd it get so bad?"

Zuck Bridge was only just wide enough for one wagon to cross, but Hoto Bridge was over three meters wide, making it easy for wagons going in opposite directions to pass each other. Besides, traffic was currently limited to travel in one direction, so it had to be absurdly busy if there was a three-day wait.

"I heard that retreating reinforcements from Shiyalta disrupted the flow of refugees across the bridge, causing everything to come to complete standstill."

"Ah..."

That was a sorry state of affairs. It sounded like the armed forces had pushed refugees aside in an attempt to cross before them, which would've led to more arguments when those same refugees tried to rejoin the flow of traffic. It was the last thing we needed.

“We can worry about that later,” I said. “The congestion might’ve died down by the time we get there. When we get close to the fork in the road, we’ll send out eagles to check the situation.”

If we followed the road along the coast toward the Hoto Bridge, we’d find a branch leading upstream toward Zuck Bridge a little before we got to the river. It was an uphill road, so it would take us an entire day to travel to the other bridge, but it was better than adding to the chaos on Hoto Bridge.

“You’re right. In that case, should we move on to talking about the unit’s current state?”

“Yeah.”

“The unit was scheduled to withdraw either tomorrow or the day after. That means we’ve already prepared our cargo.”

That came as no surprise. Based on what I’d just been told, they’d end up caught up in the battle if they waited around for another three days.

“The students injured in the fighting I mentioned were already loaded onto carts and sent home. Three students with particularly low morale were also sent back with them. It’s quite possible that they’re currently stuck waiting to cross Hoto Bridge, but we can assume that they’ll make it home safely.”

“So we’re down six members. Then we should have twenty-four plainrunners.”

“No, we have one spare. One of the riders got injured without his bird being harmed.”

“Ah, okay.”

That meant they’d be able to give me a plainrunner... Though what we really needed was a spare eagle for Carol so she could fly home right away.

“So we’ve got twenty-six eagles with twenty-six riders, and twenty-five plainrunners with twenty-four riders?”

“That’s right. But we used the eagles in our search efforts, so some of them aren’t in good shape.”

“Okay... That’s a pain.”

The quickest option for eagles would be to fly across the bay like we'd done on the way here, but if they weren't in peak condition, it would be too risky to return the same way. We'd even had to leave a few people behind before initially setting out. Anyone attempting the crossing with a bird too tired to fly the whole distance would be headed for a watery grave.

"Well, whatever," I said. "I'm sure we'll figure it out."

Unfit eagles could be left behind while the rider traveled across land instead.

"That's all I have to report. Is there anything you'd like to ask?"

"Not right now."

"Lastly, you'll have to consider how to approach your meeting with the prince consort."

"Yeah, there's that."

I hadn't given it much thought. At first, I figured there was nothing to lose from sitting down with him and having a chat, but now I realized he might end up asking me for a favor.

Myalo's opinion was of utmost importance. When it came to negotiations and politics, she was the expert.

"Given the timing, it's possible he intends to make some difficult request, but I can't guess at what it might be. In any case, the situation being what it is, there are countless awful possibilities," she replied.

I figured I'd better ask. "What sort of awful things are you imagining?"

"Hm? Well... If we suppose Kilhina's chieftain families are putting pressure on him, then he might tell you to leave the observation unit here in the city... Oh, and I suppose he could take Her Highness hostage while he demands more reinforcements from Shiyalta."

They were pessimistic ideas, but given how bad things were, they weren't unrealistic.

Someone with their back to a wall might defy common sense without a second thought. A cornered mouse would bite a cat, after all—it was dangerous to assume that it wouldn't attack.

“Okay, but that’s the absolute worst-case scenario, isn’t it? Just because he’s in a tight spot doesn’t mean he’s stupid. If he *were* to go that far, he would’ve just had his soldiers arrest me right away rather than wasting time on the warm reception. If he was making desperate plans, then he’d realize there’s a chance I’d run away.”

“Yes, that is true, but you returned without warning. Things may have changed since your arrival.”

“Ah, I didn’t consider that.”

At that very moment, the prince consort could’ve been calling on all the idiots around him and listening to their ridiculous ideas. The situation could be growing worse while I sat around, relaxed and unaware. Soldiers could appear to arrest me and Carol an hour later, or even at that very moment. It was all too possible.

“But I think it’s likely that he’ll ask for something quite small, or—more likely still—he’ll demand nothing at all,” Myalo said.

“Yeah, me too. That’s why I’m not going to turn down his invitation and leave. I’ll look like a total coward if I say I won’t meet him because I’m scared of what he might say.”

“Heh heh. I think so too,” Myalo agreed with a laugh. The idea seemed to amuse her.

“If he does ask for something, he’ll probably frame it as repayment for the help he gave us while searching for you.”

“I guess so... Though it doesn’t feel like he did much.”

He had no way of helping me because I’d traveled through the forest. It was undeniable that I’d gotten here by my own strength.

“That’s right. But if he insists that he did you a favor, then you’ll be expected to do him one in return.”

“Like a gangster calling in a debt?”

“Yes. It’s a technique that families like mine use often.”

It was straight out of the witch playbook. It was hard to say no when you were

on the receiving end of that trick.

I sighed. “Oh, what about the unit’s food? Is it coming from Reforme?”

“We’ll be taking supplies the Rube family left behind when they withdrew.”

“I see.”

We needed to avoid becoming indebted while procuring supplies, but it sounded like we had that covered.

“The thing is...your attack—or our attack, rather—slowed down the enemy’s advance,” Myalo added.

“Huh...? It did?”

That was news to me. Then again, the Papal State’s anger toward me had been a big hint. I wasn’t exactly surprised to hear that we’d slowed them down.

“Yes. I think you burned up all of the Papal State’s supplies, creating some resource shortages. When they fell behind the others, it delayed the invasion. When their soldiers were left without supplies, they got left behind. If it were any other nation, the invasion might’ve gone on regardless, but it couldn’t proceed without the Papal State.”

“That makes sense.”

The Papal State’s supplies had only made up ten percent or so of the overall stock brought by the crusaders. They could likely recover much of what they’d lost through deals with other nations, who in turn could bring in extra supplies by ship. Unfortunately for them, military allies weren’t always so accommodating. The nations orchestrating the crusade each had different goals. They weren’t like arms and legs fueled by the same heart or governed by the same brain.

There was also the issue of the Papal State’s reputation. Since the army carried the country’s name, admitting to failings and begging others for help weren’t actions that were taken lightly.

“Needless to say, any time bought in a situation like this is invaluable. And in the opinion of some, we caused so much confusion to the enemy that they couldn’t focus on their attempts at pursuing soldiers retreating from the main

battle.”

“But that’s just one interpretation,” I argued. “Think how it’s going to sound if I repeat it, with no way of knowing whether it’s true, and expect to be praised for it.”

I’d feel pathetic.

Looking at it from the enemy’s point of view, capturing the fortress would’ve taken over a week either way. Perhaps it was true that we’d caused problems for them as they drove soldiers back toward the fortress, but once they’d reached it, they’d stopped for a week while laying siege to it anyway. That would’ve been enough time to replenish the supplies they’d lost regardless.

I just couldn’t bring myself to claim that there’d been a major disruption to the crusade and that we deserved all the credit.

“It’s something to mention if you’re under pressure. If anyone claims you owe Kilhina a debt, you can say it’s already been paid. No matter how flimsy it sounds, you can’t just stay silent—it will give them the impression that they’re correct.”

That sounded sensible. Essentially, I had a counter-argument ready if anyone tried to pressure me into anything.

“All right. I’ll remember that.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck.” Myalo got up, signaling that our conversation was over.

“You’re going already?”

What’s the rush?

“Yes. I’m only here as a representative. The rest of the unit is impatiently waiting for me to confirm that you’ve both really returned to us.”

“Ah, okay... Wish everyone well from me in that case.”

“I will.” Myalo nodded. “Goodbye.”

Late that night, about ten minutes before midnight, I heard a knock on the door to our room.

“Come in,” I called.

“Pardon me, Sir.”

A woman, old enough to be called mature, entered. She was slender, with a stern face whose appearance was entirely businesslike. Rather than looking like a servant, she was dressed more formally, like a secretary. I sensed that she had a muscular body hidden beneath her clothes. It wasn't just that either—from the way she carried herself, I knew she was capable of great feats.

“Her Majesty the Queen and His Majesty the Prince Consort have summoned you.” She politely bowed her head.

“Yes, I thought it was about time.”

It seemed likely that she was Kilhina's equivalent of a royal sword.

I hadn't been able to bathe because a bath couldn't be heated so quickly under the circumstances, but I'd been able to wipe myself clean with a cloth and hot water. I'd also had a meal. If I'd been left waiting any longer, I might've fallen asleep.

“I've prepared a wheelchair for you. Please take a seat.”

Another woman, similar to the first, appeared pushing a wheelchair. The wheels turned smoothly as it glided into the room, suggesting they'd been freshly oiled.

I guess it would look a bit weird if I was hobbling along on my crutch beside these two.

The older woman then stepped out into the corridor and brought in another wheelchair. They were of a higher quality than the ones we'd been given soon after arrival, but the shape still needed refinement. They were still little more than chairs with some wheels attached. The design meant that someone had to push them—the rear wheels weren't large enough for the user to propel themselves.

Oh well. It'll do.

I stood up, ready to get into the wheelchair. “I’m in your care.”

Our wheelchairs were taken to the same room where I’d dined with the royal family during my first visit to Reforme a few months ago.

The woman pushing me went to knock on the door. When a voice from inside answered, granting us entry, she opened it.

“I have brought Your Majesty’s guests.” The woman returned to push me into the room.

There were two people sitting at the room’s table: Her Majesty the Queen and His Majesty the Prince Consort. This time, Princess Tellur was missing.

“I’m here to answer your summons. Please forgive me for not standing.” I gave Her Majesty a respectful bow, using the upper half of my body and lowering my head.

Carol greeted her with a much simpler bow. “It has been some time, Your Majesty.”

As a fellow member of royalty, Carol could use less formality without it being rude. But what stood out more was that Carol wasn’t introducing herself to the royal couple for the first time. I wasn’t surprised to learn that they’d met before, but it was news to me.

“Take your seats.” Her Majesty gestured toward a space at the table with no chairs opposite her.

The women pushing our chairs moved us both close to the table.

Her Majesty appeared tired. I certainly didn’t expect her to be cheerful, but she lacked the intensity I’d felt from her before. Perhaps it was because her power as this land’s sovereign was already slipping from her. Or maybe it was just me—perhaps the diminishing aura I perceived from her was a result of my decreasing respect for a nation on the verge of collapse. As a result, I was left feeling much less awed than before. It was hard to say which was more likely—it could’ve been both.

“Firstly, I’m glad to see you both safe. You did well to survive,” Her Majesty

said.

“You honor us by showing such concern,” I replied.

“Thank you,” Carol said after me.

We both knew it would be foolish to respond with any expression of gratitude toward her for her nation’s assistance.

“It has been some time since we last received good news,” Her Majesty continued. “Lately, all we hear about is our worsening situation.”

I can imagine.

“It was a great disappointment for me to learn that Shiyalta’s chieftains would withdraw so soon. It seems they’re unlike the Ho family—war remains alien to them.”

She was putting down Shiyalta’s reinforcement efforts while simultaneously praising my family. When she flattered me but maligned Shiyalta, I doubted she was trying to make a point about Shiyalta’s decline. More likely, she wanted us to know that she hadn’t received the support she’d deserved. Since she was saying it in front of Carol, that had to be the point she was going to make.

“Indeed. I doubt the situation would have become quite so hopeless if my family’s forces had been dispatched. It’s a shame that we weren’t able to participate.”

Our inability to send out soldiers was, of course, down to a great sacrifice we’d made to Kilhina previously. She would find it hard to criticize me or my family. While I hated to sound like a pompous brat reminding everyone of his family’s achievements, the things I said here wouldn’t affect me in the long run. These people didn’t have long to live. But even so, the whole conversation was tiresome. I hated having to think about the impression I was making.

“Yes... It is a shame.”

As I’d seen her do before, the queen narrowed her eyes for just a moment like she was scrutinizing something. It was like a unique habit that people who were used to holding authority over everyone often developed.

“Indeed,” I said. “I myself did everything I could to help, but it doesn’t appear

to have resulted in our victory.”

“So I’m aware. Likewise, we did what we could to find you,” she replied.

Ugh. I wish she would’ve served tea first.

Carol’s mother, Queen Shimoné, would’ve started with the tea, followed by an expression of sympathy for all that we’d been through. Only then would she have gotten to the main topic. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but she’d known how to put me at ease. As a general approach to negotiations, it was certainly effective.

“Our circumstances were quite unusual. I don’t think anyone could have anticipated that we’d travel through the forest.”

“Yes... Though I still expect you to show your gratitude.”

Straight to the point...

As much as I wanted to avoid it, I was prepared for our last discussion to descend into an argument.

“Have we not done enough for each other?” I asked. “If I hadn’t taken down the dragon, it might have been threatening this castle right now. And if I hadn’t attacked the enemy from the rear with fire, the assault on the castle might have already begun.”

“Boasting of one’s own contributions isn’t—”

“Your Majesty,” Carol cut her off. I looked to my side and saw Carol knitting her brow and scowling just a little. “Forgive me if I’m wrong, but are the two of you intending to flee Reforme before the city falls?”

What? Where’s she going with this? Was that an accusation? Is she going to tell them to accept their fate and die here in Reforme once the city’s captured?

“No,” Her Majesty replied. “Even if it means death, we will not abandon our people by fleeing Reforme.”

Beside her, the prince consort remained silent. He hadn’t contradicted her, which suggested he’d agreed to this plan. I didn’t know what would become of Her Majesty, but His Majesty had no hope for survival.

“Then I don’t understand it,” Carol said.

“What do you mean?”

Carol’s response was sharp. “You’re nearing the end, and yet you’re wasting what’s left of your life playing politics. If that’s truly what you want, then I won’t stop you, but...once Yuri decides he won’t do something, he won’t do it. He’s not the sort of man who’s broken down through humiliation or disparagement. I don’t think you’ll gain anything by arguing with him.”

With that, Carol fell silent, like she was done speaking her mind. She clearly wasn’t going to go on arguing the point.

I got what she was saying—this was a waste of time. There was no point in trying to create a tense atmosphere where it was hard for me to refuse. It wouldn’t work. We weren’t statesmen debating politics before an audience on the street, so I could behave as stubbornly as I wanted. A more sensible approach would’ve been for her to simply make a request outright, rather than run the risk of offending us before she got to the point. Unfortunately, politics often made that difficult.

“Forgive me...” Her Majesty said. “As I grow older, I find myself approaching every discussion this way.”

So that’s all it was. Sounds like she totally accepted what Carol just said. Well, that should be the end of the pointless talk.

“I’ll get straight to it—I’d like to ask a favor from you.”

Here it comes. I knew it. There’d have been no need for all that buildup if she didn’t want anything.

“Could I say something first?” I cut her off.

“What?”

“You can, of course, make requests, but my aim is to get the young men in my unit home safely. I can’t fulfill any requests that run counter to that aim, which limits what I can do. Please understand that.”

“Very well.”

Did she actually listen to what I just said?

Now the prince consort spoke for the first time. "I'll do the talking from here."

So she's letting him handle the explanation?

"I'd like you to help our daughter escape," he said.

Oh... Tellur. She didn't get out yet? Well, sure, I can help with that.

"I have one question," I said.

"Go ahead."

"Why didn't you send her away before now? Was it for fear of lowering morale? What I mean to ask is...does this need to be kept secret from Kilhina's people? Or rather, from all of the soldiers and civilians remaining in Reforme?"

"You're awfully insightful. Yes, that's correct."

What a thing to get hung up on. Though guess these things matter.

Information tended to spread, so it would soon leak if the Kilhinan army were given the task. Then again, I wondered why they couldn't have asked a royal sword or some servant to protect Tellur while she escaped. Maybe they didn't have many royal swords, or the ones they had were too busy with other tasks right now. The latter seemed most likely. Given the current situation, any special task force would be overwhelmed. They wouldn't just be busy, they'd be worn down by dangerous missions that had already been assigned to them. In fact, they might've experienced serious losses already.

"If that's all you're asking, then I'll accept the task. She'll only be as safe as the rest of my unit, though. I won't order my men to make major sacrifices to protect her."

"No, I'm sure she'll be safer than the rest of you. If you were pursued and had to engage with the enemy, she wouldn't be doing the fighting. It's your unit members who have to place themselves in danger when such threats arise... Assuming you wouldn't force her to fight or use her as a decoy."

That's true. And I'm definitely not going to do anything that heartless.

"That's right. I wouldn't do anything like that," I confirmed.

"I'll dispatch an attendant who can accompany you and handle my daughter's

care. She won't be a burden to you that way. You can treat her like a piece of cargo that needs feeding occasionally. That might be the most convenient option."

Right. Because she'll draw less attention that way.

"Very well," I agreed. "I'd like it if all of her belongings could be limited to a single bag, and if you could make her look less like a princess. To be clear, she doesn't have to look like a beggar, but she needs to be dressed like someone lower class. Do you agree? Or rather, will you make her agree?"

"That's all fine. I already intend to dye her hair black and dress her in commoner clothes so she can move easily."

Okay, that works.

"In that case, we'll take her with us."

"I'm glad to hear it. Thank you."

"Is that your only request? If that's all there is, I can carry out your wish without any particular trouble."

"To be honest, no."

No? I've got a bad feeling.

"Tomorrow, the last thousand civilians and three hundred soldiers will leave Reforme. I'd like you to take care of them too."

"Uh..."

My mouth was hanging open. We were only a small group of about sixty.

One thousand three hundred people? Impossible.

"We realize it's a lot to ask, and we won't insist," the prince consort added.

"I'm not sure I understand," I said.

"Even if you hadn't been here, these people would have set out tomorrow all the same," he explained.

Okay...

"As for the three hundred soldiers, we're sending away the youngest of our

knights and enlisted soldiers. I'm sure you understand the reasoning."

So that the kids with their whole lives ahead of them can escape before the attack.

The prince consort could've been acting in his own interests, but I expected he had good intentions. In reality, the soldiers he was giving us were those with the least experience. Some would be completely useless. Most of them would be young people like us—aged twenty and below—although they probably hadn't reached a neat round number like three hundred by counting all the soldiers that were twenty or under. These were more likely the very youngest of the group.

Kilhina's knight academy, much like Shiyalta's, didn't allow students under twenty to graduate. With Reforme under threat, though, graduation didn't mean anything. Many of the soldiers had probably been students of the academy up until a few months ago.

"Of those soldiers, none are particularly high status, such as the heir to a chieftain family. The same holds true for the one thousand civilians. They're considerably older on average, but...we've asked those who can't walk unaided to stay behind."

I guessed they'd range from young children to people in their thirties or forties. I had to wonder, though—if the civilians included adults, would they really listen to a unit made up of kids? I doubted they'd have much faith in the military given everything that had happened.

With three hundred and sixty soldiers keeping a thousand people under control, there'd be a ratio of about three to ten. Then again, half the civilians would be women, and some would be children, so maybe you could call it three to five. Given that the knights were trained and could handle weapons, things would still be in our favor despite the uneven numbers. I concluded that there was a risk of an uprising, but not much chance of it being successful.

"What about supplies?" I asked. "Specifically, food for the people and horses."

"We can give you whatever you need. We've amassed enough here in the castle to survive a yearlong siege. No matter how much we give you, we won't

run out.”

And I guess they won't need so much food if all those people are leaving.

“Having more food means we'll need some means to carry the extra. If it's all being carried on people's backs, we'll be slowed from a tortoise's pace to a slug's.”

“We plan to provide you with all the wagons and horses we can.”

Horses and wagons were useless to them in a siege anyway. Well, horses could be eaten, but they'd have much more worth to us.

“I see... Is there a reason you're asking this of me, specifically? I mean, is there a reason why the three hundred soldiers aren't enough already?”

Based on everything I knew, the journey back would be tough, but still manageable. I expected the party leaving Reforme would make it to Shiyalta just fine if they were left to their own devices—that is, without our assistance.

“One issue is the lack of a commanding officer,” he explained. “They're all youngsters plucked from units that were already in disarray, and they weren't trained to operate as a group. If your unit wasn't here, I'd have picked out an experienced commanding officer to go with them. But then, of course, the officer's unit would have to be reorganized, or even disbanded. The men would also have to be incorporated into other units. That's something I'd like to avoid.”

I could see why he'd want to avoid that. That said, it would only disrupt one unit. I was sure he'd still do it if I said no. Naturally, the city needed every unit it had, but one wouldn't be such a huge loss.

“Another issue is that these soldiers have no experience with this sort of escort duty. They were only assembled yesterday, in fact. I'm sure you know what that means.”

The observation unit was made of students handpicked from a group of exceptional volunteers, but even they'd needed a week of training together before we'd been able to set out. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to coordinate our actions.

Since they hadn't been trained to work together, these three hundred soldiers were little more than a disorganized mob. Soldiers who didn't even recognize the face of their commanding officer wouldn't obey orders if it meant risking their life in battle. Likewise, the commander wouldn't be able to judge whether an order was too difficult for their subordinates to carry out.

"You all completed the mission you were sent here to carry out. That is, you may be the same age as our soldiers, but at least thirty of you will have gained experience. I think you'll provide better leadership than any veteran soldier I could assign to the task. And of course, I couldn't afford to part with thirty of my own experienced soldiers."

Okay, I think I get what he's saying... Or maybe not.

My unit was just a group of kids. He might've assumed his own young soldiers would form bonds of friendship with mine, like students typically do while practicing sports together, but there was no guarantee.

In any case, I didn't feel like I was under pressure to accept the task.

This group of people couldn't have meant much to him or to Her Majesty. It might be a thousand civilians plus three hundred soldiers, but to him, they were just people who were leaving. He was unlikely to see them again, so decisions that affected their safety were unlikely to matter to him. As a ruler, he'd feel obligated to ensure his people had the best chance of survival, but even in an extreme case where everyone was wiped out soon after leaving, it wouldn't make any difference as long as the soldiers still defending Reforme's castle didn't see it happen.

More than likely, his daughter's safety was a hundred times more important to him, hence why he'd mentioned her first.

If I was being open with him, I might've suggested that he order every last soldier to abandon the castle and withdraw back to Shiyalta. Then again, Reforme was a walled city, and those walls were impressive. It was possible they still held hope of holding out until winter when the situation might turn in their favor. Having only just arrived, I didn't fully grasp the situation.

After some thought, I asked, "Will I get something in return?"

Carol looked astonished that I'd dare suggest it. To her, it probably seemed obvious that this task didn't require any payment, so the idea of compensation hadn't even occurred to her. I felt it was worth asking, though. I wouldn't demand anything in return for transporting a single princess, but I needed a good reason to accept a task this troublesome.

Although we had plainrunners, the unit as a whole could only travel as quickly as the horses pulling our wagons, so we wouldn't make quick progress regardless of whatever might've happened. But even so, having a thousand people traveling with us on foot would slow us down considerably.

Now that Carol was back, the unit members no doubt wanted to return to our homeland as quickly as possible. They'd have more than a few complaints to voice if I accepted this task without getting anything in return. Frankly, I wasn't motivated by concern for Kilhina's innocent citizens, and the rest of the observation unit probably felt the same.

"Is that necessary?"

"I'm sure my unit is eager to get home. They won't be pleased to learn I've taken on another difficult task. But if I receive something in return, it'll make it easier to justify the decision."

I'd already caused more than enough trouble for the unit. I would've rather turned down things like this. Still, this was the final wish of the nation's royalty. My public reputation could fall if I bluntly refused. I could present my own version of events to some extent, but I had many enemies in Shiyalta already. Those who'd been against the idea of the observation unit would be looking for excuses to downplay our achievements.

The prince consort looked at the queen. His sudden need to consult with her suggested that this was something the two of them hadn't already discussed.

"There's something we had always intended to give to Tellur. If you must have something, it could be placed in your care instead." The queen shot a glance at the royal sword-like woman. "Bring the seal."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the woman replied briefly before rushing out of the room.

Instead of exiting via the door behind me, she went to the door behind the queen.

The royal seal?

Kilhina's royal seal was a stamp used by its sovereign. I wouldn't know what to do with it. In fact, the queen probably still needed it. She wouldn't be able to issue high-level edicts after she'd given it away.

"She'll be back in a moment."

The woman soon returned. She held a wooden box in her hands which she silently placed in front of Carol.

What? Wasn't it for me?

There might've been some rule against giving the royal seal to anyone besides royalty, and it was possible that Kilhina's royal swords would insist on sticking to it. I figured it was best not to complain—I didn't want to get on their bad side.

The box itself was an impressive sight. It was wooden, with carvings resembling an arabesque style, and the whole thing was gold plated. That said, the gold plating had definitely seen better days. The gold had lost much of its sheen, and it was worn away on the raised parts of the carving. Even so, the box hadn't lost its overall impact.

When Carol seemed uncertain of what to do, the queen reassured her. "You can open it."

"Well, if you're quite sure..." Carol reached for the lid and opened the box.

Inside, a green lump sat on top of a cushion, and to its side there was a flat stamp made from gold.

The green thing looked like jade. It was a dark, translucent green. The color was reminiscent of life, like the budding leaves of spring had been gathered and compressed into a stone. It was so striking that the gold seal beside it looked dull by comparison.

Jade stones were fairly common, but clear ones like this were a rarity. Almost all the ones I'd seen in Shiyalta had a milkiness to them that tainted the color.

There was another beautiful jade stone like this in one of my family's storerooms, but that was just a small round thing that was used to adorn a hair ornament. I doubted that another jade stone this big and this beautiful existed anywhere else in the world.

On second thought, however, I realized that there had to be two. They were said to have originally been one.

"The empress's seal..." Carol muttered as she picked it up.

The seal had once been a ten-centimeter square, and the evidence that it was forcefully broken into two was visible when she lifted it to reveal the part that had rested against the cushion. After being divided, it became a rectangle whose length was twice its height.

The handle had been broken off, making it hard to use as a stamp. For that reason, the gold seal beside it was probably used instead in most situations. The gold stamp was rectangular and had a handle, which had clearly been designed to be easy to grip, firmly attached to its center.

If my understanding was correct, the jade seal was once used by the empress of the Shantila Empire.

Some said it had been broken in an accident after the war that caused the empire's collapse, while others claimed it had been deliberately broken so that the Yulan Kingdom and the Noa Kingdom—the nations formed by the two most powerful imperial sisters—could have a piece each. The two seals had never been reunited since.

These incomplete pieces had continued to serve as national seals of Yulan and Noa until the kingdoms had fallen. Each was said to have gone missing following the fall of the nations.

These were popular pieces of historical trivia, and the seal was talked of like a thing of legend. It was moving to witness it firsthand. To the Shanti people—we whose ancestors were part of the Shantila Empire—this was a priceless piece of history.

"I hear that the other half is in Shiyalta. Should this city fall, you may do as you wish with the seal."

The implication was that I'd have to give it back if the capital survived the war... Not that there was much chance of that.

Apparently, the other half of this thing was in Carol's home. I hadn't had any idea. It might've been a gap in my education, but I suspected the other half's location had been kept secret from the public.

"Are you sure?" Carol sounded concerned. "Isn't Princess Tellur...?"

She must've felt that Tellur was the rightful inheritor of the item.

"That girl lacks the courage needed to raise her own army and take back her country. If this kingdom falls, ownership of this seal will only bring her misfortune."

That sounded reasonable. Unless Tellur was willing to fight to take back her kingdom, brandishing the power of the royal seal would only make her a target. If Tellur were to ask Shiyalta's queen for a province so that she could begin rebuilding Kilhina, it could end with a royal sword being dispatched to assassinate her.

By giving up the royal seal, however, Tellur would show that she had no such ambitions. She'd be given a warmer welcome and ultimately live a happier life.

"If that's your wish, we'll take good care of it." Carol closed the lid of the box.

"Please do," the queen agreed.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" the queen asked while almost glaring at me. Her face said, *Isn't this enough for you?*

Considering how precious the royal seal was, it was a predictable reaction.

"I realize that it's a priceless treasure, but it won't prove useful in this situation."

Besides, the original plan had probably been for Tellur to hand the seal over to Shiyalta's royal family anyway. Now it simply happened to be convenient to say that the seal was payment.

"If I accept the seal, it'll merely be stored away within Sibiak's royal castle.

That's far beyond the reach of any soldier. They won't be thankful."

"Hm... Then what *would* satisfy you?"

I've made her angry at me, haven't I? It was clear from both her face and her voice.

I fully appreciated the value and the cultural significance of the royal seal. History was an interest of mine, and the seal held a sense of wonder. I actually thought she had the right to be annoyed.

"I would like to accept the seal...but I'd also like monetary rewards and decorations of some kind."

"Decorations...? We have nothing prepared for you."

Military awards came in many forms, but they were generally physical items, rather than words that merely existed on paper. This situation called for badges or medals that we could wear around our necks or on our chests. Since it was all about appearances, the design had to be something specially chosen. They obviously wouldn't be able to prepare anything like that in time for tomorrow.

"If you simply produce a document saying that the decorations are to be awarded—along with monetary rewards big enough that no one will want to pass them up—that would be sufficient. A suitable design can be chosen after everyone has returned safely, and Princess Tellur can be the one to present the decorations."

"If that's all you want...then fine."

From the queen's point of view, it must've seemed like a small thing compared to the seal. It was as though she'd offered me a mansion, only to have me reply that it wasn't good enough unless she put up a few shelves inside it first.

But a promise of decorations really *was* what I needed. For someone with the authority and resources of a queen, it took no effort to provide rewards that would please a group of sixty soldiers.

"Please limit the award of decorations to those who see that every last civilian escapes safely," I added. "Anyone who leaves the unit early shouldn't receive

one. I'm sure it'll change their attitudes."

"That's fine too."

All right. We've got a deal.

"And this goes without saying, but please produce whatever documentation is necessary to transfer those three hundred soldiers to a new commanding officer. If you can agree to these conditions, I'll gladly offer protection to Princess Tellur and the one thousand civilians."

"I see," the queen replied. "The royal family has no money here. All of our movable wealth was moved to Shiyalta already."

Huh? For a moment, I felt a vortex of complicated feelings, like a drop of black ink staining my heart. So they moved all of their wealth already? Well, that probably makes things easier.

"I'll leave it under Princess Carol's control," the queen continued. "After our deaths, it can be used for the reward payments and providing for the refugees. Please give whatever's left to our daughter."

I had no idea how large of a sum she was talking about, but we'd just been asked to use it all up. They were being so lavish that it made me uncomfortable. But if Tellur used her inheritance to indulge herself while the Kilhina refugees were doomed to poverty, it could put her in a dangerous position. Not to imply that Tellur was likely to prove greedy and tightfisted, but letting someone else handle the money was probably a good idea, whether Tellur appreciated it or not.

Based on what she'd just said, the funds would be given to Carol, rather than our current queen, Queen Shimoné. Kilhina's queen must have had enough confidence in Carol's youthful sense of justice to trust her to use the funds responsibly.

Tellur's parents clearly had very little faith in their daughter's capabilities. I got the impression that they couldn't trust her to understand the technicalities of the political decisions she'd be forced to make if the money was all left to her. If that were the case, then they had to shape Tellur's future for her while they were still alive.

“Is that acceptable to you?” the queen asked me.

“Of course. It’s a favorable arrangement.”

“I see.”

The queen breathed a sigh of relief. Her shoulders slumped like the strength had gone out of her, and her straight back then collapsed against her seat’s backrest. With one of her chief concerns taken care of, it had to have been a weight off her shoulders. When she spoke, her tone was somewhat lifeless. “You may leave and go rest.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We’ll return to our room.”

Despite saying that, all I could do was remain sitting. I was in a wheelchair that I couldn’t move by myself.

The queen looked puzzled for a moment, then she realized what the problem was.

“Oh. That’s right.” She raised her voice a little and said, “Take them back to their room.”

The two royal sword-like women then approached the rear of our chairs.

Just when both of our chairs were about to be wheeled away, however, the queen ordered the servants to stop. “Wait—there’s one last thing I want to ask.”

What now?

“What do you intend to do next?”

What’ll I do? She wants to know if I’ll do my job properly? No, that’s not it.

“That’s quite a vague question, Your Majesty. Do you mean after completing my mission?”

“Yes. The tasks you’ll set yourself after graduating from the academy.”

She wants to know my life goals? I’m really not sure how to answer that.

She likely wanted to hear me say that I’d kill as many Kulati as I could and pile the bodies high, but this wasn’t a job interview—I didn’t need to make up a response that pleased her. Instead, I told her my honest wishes.

“I’d like to build a house by a lake where I can see the mountains and live there peacefully with someone I love. I’ll hire someone to help with small tasks at home. I’ll plant flowers, catch fish, read books, and take it easy... No problems, just a peaceful life. That’s what I want.”

After everything that had happened, I didn’t want fame or more war. A chance to rest was the only thing on my mind. I didn’t know how well my fantasy would work out in practice. Maybe I’d find it surprisingly boring and soon start wanting more, which meant it might’ve been the wrong answer. At the very least, though, I wanted to live that way when I got old, so it wasn’t a total lie. Still, this fantasy of mine made me feel guilty for some reason.

“I know it’s an impossible dream,” I added.

For a moment, the queen seemed lost for words. She opened her mouth, hesitated, then remained silent. It seemed this hadn’t been the answer she was looking for. But then her expression turned to a smile. “Ha.”

It wasn’t quite a sigh, just her exhaling all the air in her lungs. For no discernible reason, a tear ran down the queen’s cheek. Despite the tear, she didn’t sob. Her voice was strangely unwavering when she replied, “I see. Well, you can go.”

Carol said a few words before leaving. “Please leave the rest to us, Your Majesty. We may be unworthy of these tasks, but I promise you we’ll give them our all.”

The queen merely nodded in response. Once our wheelchairs were turned around, we couldn’t see her expression.



After we’d left, we were taken back to our room in our wheelchairs. I realized that the candles in our room had been replaced with fresh ones. Our hosts were certainly thoughtful.

The royal sword-like woman passed me the crutch that I’d left in the room. “Will you require any further assistance?” she asked.

“No, I’m good. It’s not that hard for me to walk a little.”

I used the crutch to get up from my chair.

“Then you must excuse me. Please call on me if you need anything.”

The royal sword-like woman bowed her head, left the room, and closed the door behind her.

Using my crutch, I walked over to the couch. I couldn't help but sigh.
“Phew...”

Carol also sat down in the chair. “Can I ask you something, Yuri?”

“What?”

“Just now...why'd you accept the task of transporting all those civilians?”

“You wish I hadn't?”

If anything, I thought turning it down would've made her mad.

“It's not that... It's just not like you.”

Isn't it?

“I didn't want to accept, but it's not a bad plan. Our unit will get some recognition for it.”

It was particularly good news for the plainrunner riders. It wasn't that they hadn't been useful, but they'd generally been left at our base of operations when they hadn't been transporting supplies.

There were no awards given for a role like that, and they wouldn't have anything to boast about afterward. If we carried out this new task, though, they'd share in the glory as long as they stuck with us to the end.

“That's true, but...you normally avoid troublesome tasks, don't you?”

“Even I can't ignore someone's last wishes... If it's someone I know, that is.”

Though they're pretty much strangers. I suppose the prince consort isn't a total stranger since he was one of Gok's friends.

“All right. Personally, I think it's an admirable task for a knight.”

“To me, it's a complication that makes it harder to carry out the original objective.”

“How so?”

She really doesn't get it?

Apparently, Carol didn't realize that this new task would make it much harder to keep the unit organized while on the move. Sure, we got the royal seal and some decorations as part of the deal, but those wouldn't make it any easier.

“Are you...going home first?” I asked.

“Huh?!” Carol cried in surprise. It seemed she hadn't considered this.

“Most of the kingeagle company will have to be sent away. We don't need twenty eagles escorting us back. It'll just be more mouths to feed...”

We wanted eagles because they were useful for reconnaissance, but we'd only need four at most—the other twenty-two would just get in the way. They'd be like extra baggage that ate up all our meat.

“I'm not leaving.”

That's what I thought.

Carol was so popular among the Knight Academy students that sending her away would be a blow to morale. And even if she *were* to go back early on my orders, it would still look like she'd left all the refugees behind. If I could've made a phone call to Queen Shimoné to get her opinion, she probably would've asked me to keep Carol there.

We'd be safe because the enemy would have to stop for at least a week when they attacked Reforme, no matter how well they executed their assault. Both the battle and its aftermath would take considerable time. Meanwhile, we'd easily reach Shiyalta's border within the next twenty days, even with refugees slowing us down.

There was a limit to how far a mounted soldier could travel without rest. If a slow-moving target didn't have much of a head start—say, only about half a day—then lightly equipped lancers could easily catch up to them. They were capable of chasing targets relentlessly for up to twenty-four hours. If the chase was going to last more than a day, however, it was another story. Pursuers chasing a target with a seven-day head start had to stock up to prepare for the

journey, which meant carrying food for their horses. They'd have to take horse-drawn carts, so even lightly equipped soldiers would have to slow down to match their pace.

In our case, we'd have a seven-day head start on a journey of less than twenty days. There was no way the enemy could catch us. If this invasion proceeded like most, then there was virtually no chance of the enemy even dispatching anyone to pursue us.

Still, there were exceptions to every rule—the dragon had taught me that.

“Having you with us puts the refugees in danger. Make sure you're aware of that.”

“Me...? I don't see how.”

“If you're with us, the observation unit...well, I'm not sure we can call it an *observation* unit anymore...has to prioritize your protection. If you're around, we'll need soldiers assigned to keep you away from harm—soldiers who would've otherwise been helping civilians.”

But letting her cross the bay could be risky... Even if she's on a kingeagle, I don't want her making that flight with an injured leg. I wouldn't be able to oversee the crossing because I have to head back overland. Then again, the risk's not massive. Even with an injured leg and an unfamiliar eagle, I'm ninety-five percent sure she'd be just fine. Maybe I'm worrying needlessly. She's probably safe whatever she does. The chance of running into trouble while traveling overland is probably about five percent too...

I couldn't decide which was the wiser decision.

“Well then... What should I do?” Carol asked while I was debating over the options myself.

I looked up at her and noticed a sad expression on her face.

“I'll...go along with whatever you decide,” she added.

“Well yeah, you promised me that right from the start,” I replied. *Don't say it like you weren't listening to me until now. It scares me.* “Give me a moment to think.”

Okay, it's not like they're going to send assassins after her. If they're determined to take her alive, then there's no chance of her getting killed in an enemy attack. Come to think of it, I can't even imagine a situation where Carol can't just jump on an eagle and escape. We just need to make sure there's always one ready.

"All right. I'll take you with me, but you have to agree that you'll flee on an eagle if I tell you to. No arguing when the time comes. Promise me that now."

"All right, I promise."

Carol had never disobeyed my orders before, and yet I made her promise like this every time.

"Then it's settled. You're traveling across land with me."

I'd made my choice. I just hoped I wouldn't come to regret it.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

I'm sure it'll all work out.

"Then I guess it's time for bed," Carol said.

Yeah, I'm beat.

"Okay," I agreed.

I climbed into my bed and wrapped my body in the soft linens.

"Can I sleep in your bed?" Carol asked.

Needless to say, the room had two beds.

After a little thought, I said, "Sure."

Carol climbed straight into the bed with me.

After a while, Carol spoke. "Hey..."

She hadn't tried to initiate anything when she'd first gotten into bed with me. We weren't touching each other at all. We were both lying down ready to go to sleep.

Today was exhausting, I told myself. I don't have the energy to do anything with her tonight. I'm too tired. Let's give up on that idea and go to sleep. Out loud, I asked, "What?"

"I don't want you to die for me. Can you promise you won't?"

Well, that's not the request I expected. I guess I was the only one lying here thinking about sex.

"If I *do* die for you, it'll be because you were in a pinch and I was making a frantic effort to save you... I'm not going to promise not to save you."

"Well, okay, but... When I imagine you dying for me, it scares me..."

What a thing to think about before going to sleep. But at least she'll be more careful if she's having thoughts like that.

"It scares me too," I admitted.

"Really...?"

I thought back to the crash.

"I never told you about Stardust. The crash didn't kill him. But his wings and legs were in a terrible state, and probably his insides too... I put him to rest."

"Ah, you did...?"

It sounded like that gave Carol a lot to think about. I couldn't tell whether she was mourning Stardust or remembering Mountain Haze.

"So I started to think... 'What if Carol's half dead? What if I have to do the same for her?'"

The fear came back to me as I put the thoughts into words, sending an icy chill down my spine.

"Oh... I think I might lose my mind if I had to do a thing like that," Carol agreed.

Of course you would.

"Let's make sure neither of us ever has to," I said.

"Okay."

Now I'm really sleepy.

"Let's sleep."

"All right." Carol sounded kind of happy.



"...Yuri... Highness..."

I woke up to the sound of a voice.

"Yuri, please wake up."

It was Myalo.

"Ah... I'm awake."

When I sat up, my whole body felt heavy. I was sleep-deprived.

I could see that it was just starting to grow light outside.

It's early morning?

"Myalo, you're here to fetch me?"

"Yes."

Myalo's face looked dignified as she stood before me, but she lacked her usual energy. Maybe she'd slept less than I had.

"Sorry, but things got complicated," I said. "Have you heard?"

"I have. A nightcloak came to me this morning."

Nightcloak?

"You mean...one of those women who look like royal swords?"

"I think so, yes."

"Is 'nightcloak' what Kilhina calls them?"

"The nature of their group is quite different, but I think they're roughly in the same category, yes."

That's what I thought.

"All right, got it. Well, should we head out? There's a lot to deal with, but I

want everything sorted out and ready for us to leave by noon.”

“Please have breakfast first. I’ve prepared some food,” Myalo said while putting a wicker basket on the table.

“You’re always prepared.”

“Thank you.”

I casually opened the watch by my bed and saw that it was 6 a.m. I’d overslept.

“There are royal guards outside loading up our wagons under the prince consort’s command. It’ll take them a while, so you don’t need to rush.”

“What was Liao’s opinion?” I asked while getting out of bed.

“He hasn’t said anything. I think he’s against it, but he won’t say so openly.”

“Why’s that?”

“If he were to defy you and leave with those loyal to the Rube family, some of the students would hold a grudge against him after the operation’s over. After all, this new undertaking is highly likely to be successful.”

That made sense. If everyone except the Rube family’s followers got decorations, it’d make them look bad.

“I just hope they don’t desert us at a crucial moment,” I said.

“I’m sure that won’t happen.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because Princess Carol is with us. It’d be shameful enough if they deserted now, but if they were to run when her life’s in danger, they’d be utterly disgraced.”

Ah, that’s true. Obvious, in fact. This isn’t good—I can hardly think so soon after getting up.

“Carol, are you still asleep?” I asked.

Carol suddenly sat up in bed. “I’m awake.”

She sounded far from sleepy. She looked wide awake, in fact.

“Myalo brought some food. Let’s eat,” I said while taking a seat.

I poured some water from a tankard into a cup and took a bite of sausage in bread. It wasn’t particularly good food—it had probably been made for the soldiers.

Carol took her seat and started eating too. We both finished our meals in silence.

“Thanks for the food.”

“Thanks,” Carol said without lifting her head. She seemed a little down.

Myalo looked at Carol for a moment, then looked straight at me.

“Yuri, you slept with Carol?” she asked.

Carol twitched like a child whose parents had just caught them doing something naughty.

“Yes, I did,” I replied.

It was obvious at a glance that both Carol and I had slept in the same room, so I knew that wasn’t what Myalo was asking. Although we hadn’t done anything last night, the fact that we’d both spent the night in the same bed despite there being two in the room was bound to raise suspicion. I’d expected some awkward questions from the moment Myalo woke me up.

“Is that right?” Myalo looked down, then fell silent. A moment later she looked at Carol and bowed. “Carol, congratulations.”

“Huh...?” Carol was dumbfounded as she looked back at Myalo, who still hadn’t raised her head.

“I’m sure everyone will agree you’ve made a fine choice and that Her Majesty will be very pleased.”

With that, Myalo finally raised her head.

“No, we’re not...” Carol began.

Myalo looked away from us and changed the topic. “Oh, I’m s-sorry... How rude of me. I’ll leave you while you get dressed.”

She quickly walked over to the door and opened it. Without saying anything

more, she stepped out into the corridor and closed the door again behind her.

“Yuri, go after her.”

“You don’t mind?” I replied instantly.

Carol looked at me as if to say, *Of course I don’t!*

Was that obvious? I wondered.

“You’re okay with me chasing after her?” I asked again.

That question took Carol by surprise. Her face contorted.

“Please...”

“Okay, I’m going.”

I got up and passed by Carol as I approached the door. As I did, she grabbed my hand. I looked at her and found her looking up at me, ready to cry.

“Don’t...” For a moment she squeezed my hand, then she let go again. “Please go after her.”

I got the feeling there was a major misunderstanding here.

“Maybe I said it wrong. You know I don’t have enough cunning to have cheated on you since we got here, right?”

“You...mean it?”

“Yeah.”

This time I left the room.

Myalo had walked to the end of the corridor. She was resting her hand on the windowsill and pretending to look outside, though her eyes were cast downward. Her shoulders looked tense. She certainly wasn’t appreciating the view.

“Myalo.”

“Ah...” She looked over at me as I approached. She wasn’t crying, but I could tell from her expression that I’d caught her off guard. “Yuri, I’m sorry... I’m not sure why it came as such a shock to me... I’ll leave now.”

“You’ve got time, haven’t you? We could talk for a while.”

I reached out my hand and tried to stroke her hair. Myalo's face twitched at the sight of my hand, like she was recoiling from me. I felt a light impact as she slapped my hand away.

"Ah... I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be..."

Never thought the day would come when Myalo slaps my hand away.

"But... I'm sorry. I can't right now..." Myalo said as she gripped the hand she'd just pushed away.

"No, I'm sorry. I was being insensitive."

"It's my fault. I'd already guessed when I saw you yesterday... But when I heard you say it, my feelings got the better of me."

"I see."

"But please don't misunderstand me. I'm... I never wanted to be your wife."

I know that.

On several occasions, I'd gotten the impression that Myalo wanted to be a military tactician, or a chief of staff, or a revolutionary, but I never felt she aspired to be someone's wife or lover. When she said it wasn't what she wanted, she probably meant it. Still, I got the sense that her feelings were somewhat conflicted.

"I know," I told her.

"Even I...can't understand why I reacted this way."

She seemed confused; or perhaps she was just processing many different feelings at once.

"There's nothing wrong with that. It's like you said before—you wouldn't want to be around someone with no feelings who acts like they're made of stone."

Long ago, when women had rejected me, I'd felt surprisingly down over it too. Back then, just like now, I'd been an idiot.

"Right now, I wish I was made of stone," Myalo said.

I know the feeling.

“Some time ago, I think I told you that I could never hate you,” I said.

“That’s right.”

“Isn’t that enough? I’ll never push you away. Unless you come to hate me and want some distance between us, I’ll be here.”

When I said that, Myalo raised her head and looked at me in surprise. Something about her was different from a moment ago. It was like the doubts in her heart had been cleared away.

“Are you sure about that? I have to admit, I can be difficult to deal with. My feelings are completely unreasonable. Pushing me away might make your life easier.”



“Life wouldn’t be easier at all. There’s nothing difficult about you.”

“Yuri, you certainly know how to keep people enthralled. I’m not sure what to say.”

Sounds like we’ll be okay.

“If you’re feeling better now, let’s go. I need to wash my face and head out right now.”

“Okay.”

III

After tidying myself up a little, I headed toward the castle gate, aided by my crutch.

Before I got there, I found the woman from yesterday waiting for me. There were documents and an item resting on a table right in the middle of the corridor. The woman was standing beside it.

“Lord Yuri.”

The item appeared to be the royal seal. It had been brought here along with some documents.

“These are the documents you’ll need. Please check that they’re suitable.”

“Thanks.”

I picked up the pile of sheets and looked them over. There were seven sheets in total. After skimming through, everything looked fine.

“Myalo, check there’s nothing wrong with these,” I said as I handed them to her.

“Okay.”

Myalo took them and began reading quickly.

“Carol, check the contents of the box.”

“Got it.”

As unlikely as it was, it would be a disaster if the jade had been switched for a lump of lead without us noticing. Future generations would tell the tales of the priceless Shanti treasure that had been forever lost thanks to the carelessness of a fool named Yuri. I wasn't taking any chances.

"It's fine," Carol said.

Okay, so the seal's good.

A little later, Myalo finished reading. "I see no problems," she said.

"All right."

I picked up the stack of sheets.

"Please take this," the woman said.

I was presented with a tube. It had been made by steaming and rolling a thin piece of wood to create a container that could store rolled-up sheets without folding them. Its appearance was impressive. A piece of parchment, which had been sealed by wax, was wrapped around it for decoration. It appeared to have been treated to repel light rain.

"That helps," I said.

I rolled up the seven sheets and put them in the tube before sealing it.

"Her Majesty and His Majesty won't be there to see you off."

They won't?

I realized that they'd want to minimize the chances of anyone noticing that we had their daughter. If the queen and prince consort came out to see off some refugees, people would start suspecting there was more to it.

"They really worry about their daughter," I noted.

"Indeed," the woman replied with a slightly embarrassed smile.

It was clear that she felt attached to the queen and the prince consort—or, more likely, to the royal family as a whole. These nightcloaks felt very different from the royal swords of Shiyalta.

"So, when will we receive the 'cargo'?"

“We should have told you sooner, but the handover won’t take place until you’re ready to depart.”

“All right.”

I wondered whether there’d be any tearful goodbyes. Hopefully, they wouldn’t become drawn out and hold us up.

“Please use this to carry the box.”

The woman gave me a shoulder bag made with thick fabric. It looked like the box would be a perfect fit. The fabric had about an extra centimeter of thickness in the parts that would touch its corners. They’d really thought of everything. They probably didn’t want to imagine the box and its contents getting broken while I was traveling.

“Thanks.”

I picked up the royal seal’s box from the table. It was strangely heavy. I’d planned to hold it in one hand while opening the bag with the other, but I needed two hands to lift it.

It was no wonder. There was a solid gold stamp inside, and gold had an unusually high density. Jade wasn’t exactly a lightweight rock either. The box was bound to be heavy.

I had to wonder why they’d chosen gold for the second stamp. Hardwood would’ve been a whole lot more convenient.

“Please, allow me.” The nightcloak held the shoulder bag open.

With the box held in both hands, I slid it into the opening. As expected, it was a perfect, snug fit. Once the box was in the bag and I’d put it over my shoulder, it felt so heavy it hurt.

“Well, I’ll see you again when you hand over the cargo,” I said.

“Yes. Please take care.” The nightcloak bowed, then left us.

After I’d stepped outside via a side entrance that was positioned beside the castle’s impressive main gate, I noticed an absence of soldiers. It was long past time for everyone to get up, and they should’ve been working here.

Myalo must've read my thoughts, because she said, "I heard the breakfast bell ringing a while ago. Everyone must be gathered in the dining hall."

"Okay."

"Your horses are tethered over there."

"Ah, that brings back memories."

The horses by the side entrance were the ones we'd ridden here. There were also two plainrunners beside them. One of them was Myalo's. It was familiar because it was originally from the Ho family's city residence.

"Should I ride a horse?" Myalo asked after glancing at the plainrunner.

"Ah... Yeah."

I looked at Carol for just a moment. I got the sense that things were still a little awkward between her and Myalo.

One of the injured unit members had left a plainrunner behind, so now we had two spares. Those would be the ones Carol and I rode.

It was easier for an injured person to climb onto a plainrunner since they could crouch low to the ground, and more importantly, it wouldn't look right if Myalo got a plainrunner while Carol or I didn't have one.

"You're sure you don't mind? You know how to ride a horse, don't you?"

"I'm not good at it, but yes."

"It was trained by the Kulati, so it acts a little strange, but you'll soon get used to it."

"All right."

Myalo's plainrunner seemed to recognize my face when I approached. It bent its legs to make it easy for me to get on. I held my crutch under my armpit as I climbed onto its back.

"All right, let's go."

Then I realized we were about to leave a horse behind. I decided I'd just have to lead it by the reins.

Once we'd moved away from the castle, we found that announcements had already been made and preparations had started. The main road was full of refugees that we'd be escorting home with us.

There were men, and of course, lots of women and children. Besides some small children who were light enough to carry, they all looked capable of walking. We'd been told that elderly hadn't been allowed to come with us. I didn't know how exactly the news had been delivered, but it must've caused some arguments.

"This doesn't look very orderly," I said.

"It definitely doesn't," Myalo replied.

People did at least keep a straight line clear for us to walk our plainrunners, but passing through it felt frightening. If a child were to leap out, we might trample them, so we had to go slowly.

As we proceeded, I noticed what appeared to be a building for housing soldiers. The doors were wide open, and the soldiers inside were simply standing around. It seemed like they had nothing to do. They were probably the three hundred that would come with us.

I got closer to see what they were doing and found they lacked any leadership whatsoever. Although no one was lying around on the ground, some were sitting and some were standing. They should've all trained at an academy of some sort, so the only time they'd be this disorderly would be when their commanding officer was absent. It didn't really matter whether they sat or stood, but if there was a commanding officer around, they'd probably get the soldiers to line themselves up rather than letting them laze around.

I could only assume they'd been plucked from their units, told to go here, and then hadn't received further orders.

"Do they actually have anyone assigned as their commanding officer right now?"

"No, they don't," Myalo replied.

Just as I'd thought. The idea might've been to avoid a situation where a commanding officer was chosen without my approval, leading to some

confusion when I replaced them later.

If the chain of command became unclear, it'd be a major problem, so I couldn't criticize the approach. Even so, I'd normally expect someone with a bit of authority to notice and put them in order in the meantime. As it turned out, it was like the prince consort had said—anyone high-ranking enough to give them orders didn't have time for them under the current circumstances.

I was going to have my work cut out for me, getting this lot to fall in line.

"Wow... What a pain. Is our unit somewhere around here?" I asked Myalo.

"The plainrunner company should be arriving at the city gates around now. The soldiers with eagles are still on-site at our former camp so we have someone there to guard our belongings."

"Ah... All right. Anyhow, we need to get these refugees moving." I scanned our surroundings before adding, "But we'll have to lay down a few rules first."

All of the refugees were carrying large amounts of luggage. Some even had small carts with them. Hell, someone was trying to carry a dresser he'd removed from his home.

Does that guy really think he can lug a dresser all the way to Shiyalta? Even if there wasn't a war going on...

Getting people to part with the large items was going to be the first task. Until we did that, we couldn't start moving.

"First, let's have the three hundred soldiers meet with the unit."

"Hey."

I stopped at the entrance of the soldiers' quarters. I wasn't speaking to anyone in particular—the soldiers were scattered about inside and outside.

"Yes, Sir!"

One of the more serious soldiers who was still standing gave me a salute. I could tell he was the clean-cut sort because he'd been standing all this time. If I'd been in his shoes, I would've joined the people who were sitting down.

“I don’t know what they’ve told you, but I’m Yuri Ho, your new superior. I’m going to give you an order right now.”

“Yes, Sir! I’m listening!”

“Pick out whoever you think’s the best soldier, then bring them to me.”

The man’s mouth hung open for a moment, but then he appeared to be giving this strange order some serious thought. I wondered how I’d react if he said, “That would be me.” I’d probably laugh.

“Forgive me, Sir, but I have two different people in mind! One of them is very smart, the other is very strong!”

Well...I guess either of those two would be fine. Ideally, I wanted someone popular, but I couldn’t ask for that or I’d just get someone with connections to a chieftain family.

“Does the strong soldier have a good head too?”

“No, Sir! He’s an idiot!”

An idiot...

There were various types of idiots. If he was the charismatic type of idiot, then he’d be good enough. I decided to play it safe, though.

“Call the smart guy over.”

The person he brought over was a sulky-looking young man with tufts of unkempt hair that suggested he hadn’t brushed it since getting up. His height and amount of muscle mass looked average, but he didn’t look particularly well-trained for a Knight Academy student. If anything, he looked a little overweight.

“This is him, Sir!”

The soldier he’d brought was silent, but he was staring straight at me. Normally I’d expect the guy to give his name; that should’ve been common sense. I doubted the customs he’d been taught at Kilhina’s knight academy differed much in that respect.

“Well? Why don’t you state your name?”

The answer came from the soldier beside him. "His name is Giaume Zuzu!"

"I didn't ask you. State your name," I repeated.

The way he looked at me gave me the impression that he was sizing me up. The rest of the three hundred had noticed what was going on, and all eyes were on us.

He finally spoke. "I haven't decided whether you're worth giving my name to."

Oh ho...

"Wha—! How rude." The exclamation came from Carol, who was sitting on a plainrunner behind me.

Carol probably wasn't used to encountering this sort of attitude, but I'd gotten used to dealing with people like this in the business world and thought nothing of it. Sometimes people like him turned out to be interesting. Caph was one such example. But unless this one had some serious competence to compensate for the attitude, he was worthless to me.

"You haven't left me a choice," I said.

I took out the spear that I'd been carrying with my belongings and unsheathed it. I'd cleaned its point of blood and grease, but hadn't found time to sharpen it. At this point I realized that I should've at least had someone in the castle fix the shaft.

"Uh, um... I know he's rude, but..."

"Quiet," I ordered.

The other man closed his mouth.

Giaume was still standing in the same spot. He hadn't backed off an inch.

I tried pressing my left foot against the stirrup to ensure my injury wasn't going to cause a problem. I could kill him if I made a mistake. Well, not that it would matter too much—I'd just say that I executed him for disobedience.

I narrowed my eyes and judged the distance. While grasping the spear's shaft at just the right point along its length, I raised it to my shoulder.

“Yah!”

I swept the spear tip right in front of his face, grazing Giaume’s forehead. The hair by his temples rippled, then the pieces that had been cut were carried off by the wind.

The cut hadn’t been a perfect straight line, so about half of his hair was left behind. The spear tip wasn’t as pointed as it used to be. That said, it was impressive that the point had still been sharp enough to cut through someone’s hair after it had been thrust into metal plate armor.

“If you think you’re something special, then prove it by gathering up your unit and bringing them to the city gates. Or, if you don’t like following orders, get out of here.”

I could tell that he had guts. He hadn’t even blinked as the spear had passed by his eyes. Maybe he was a little full of himself, or maybe he was just rebellious, but that was nothing I couldn’t handle.

If it turned out he wasn’t up to the task I’d given him, I’d figure something else out. And everyone was listening, so anyone with a brain would make their own way to the city gates anyway.

A group of familiar faces were lined up on plainrunners in front of Reforme’s outermost city wall, just outside the city gate. When they saw us approaching, they all saluted.

Carol and I had our plainrunners approach them slowly.

Respect for the royal family must’ve been at a high, because many of them regarded Carol through tear-filled eyes, and some were so emotional that they sobbed loudly. I realized now that I should’ve predicted this reaction.

Once we were close enough, we stopped our plainrunners right in front of them.

“Carol, say a few words to them.”

Carol responded with a nod. “Everyone! Sorry for making you worry, and thank you for your hard work defending the camp in our absence!”

Carol spoke with flawless enunciation. The face of every single soldier trembled with emotion as they listened. There was no one who could've taken Carol's place—only someone born to be held in the highest regard could've stirred their emotions like this.

"Yeah. Well done, all of you," I added. "Liao, have everyone take a break."

Liao nodded to me. "All troops, rest where you are!"

Liao walked over when I'd dismounted from my plainrunner.

"I didn't think you'd make it back. It's good to see you alive."

He extended his hand, so I gripped it firmly in mine. It was a strong, men's handshake.

"Yeah. It was a total nightmare."

"When I thought that you might both be dead, I could barely eat."

Liao genuinely *did* look relieved, though it was Carol's safety rather than mine which was important. If she'd died, it would've been a terrible blemish on his record. Although Liao had already heard reports from Myalo, he mustn't have been completely satisfied until he'd seen Carol with his own eyes.

"Oh, I've still got the spear you lent me. Thanks—it was a fine weapon." I offered Liao the spear that I'd just used to cut Giaume's bangs.

"What?"

For a moment, Liao didn't seem to recognize it. At first, he mustn't have realized that he was its original owner. "That's the one I dropped from the air? Looks like it's seen a lot of use."

"It was too long. I couldn't walk through the forest with it, so I had to shorten it. The point's still in one piece, though."

"Let's see." Liao took the spear from me and removed the sheath. "Based on what Myalo told me, you were busy with it. It looks a little dulled."

"Yeah, I used it twice. At one point I thrust it through the gauntlet of a suit of plate armor." Liao looked at me with a start, but I continued, "I thrust it through

iron and it didn't so much as chip. Now I see why the Rube family's known for their metalworking. I guess they prepared a fine spear for their only son."

"Oh... You should hold on to it. It's gotta have sentimental value now."

What? Really?

"You don't mind?"

"I already gave it to you. Besides, I bought a new spear here while I was waiting."

Ah... Well, of course he did. He wasn't going to spend the whole time without a weapon.

"Okay, but...this is a good spear. I'll feel bad if I don't pay you back later."

"Forget that. Tell me some good stories and we'll call it even."

It didn't feel right to pay him for it with stories, but I didn't want to turn down the offer. I decided I'd accept and buy him something nice once I got home—I could afford it, after all.

"All right. We can talk tonight. Right now, there's work to do. I know I shouldn't have, but I took on another difficult task."

"Yeah, I heard from Myalo."

"Let's go talk over there. Carol, Myalo, come with us."

We couldn't talk openly while we were in earshot of soldiers here, so the four of us walked a short distance away.

"I know that you heard from a royal sword—or from a nightcloak, rather. How much did she tell you?" I asked while looking at Liao.

Myalo already knew everything she needed to, so there was no need to ask her.

"We're taking a young princess, three hundred young knights, and a thousand civilians with us, right? And something about decorations when we get home. That's as much as I know."

"All right. Each decoration comes with about fifty gold coins. It's not just honor."

Fifty coins was a guess, but my estimate probably wouldn't be far off. It was the equivalent of about five million yen. As a comparison, I'd received a reward of thirty gold coins from Her Majesty back when I'd developed the smallpox vaccine.

"We could have a real good time with that," Liao said.

He's going to party with it?

"Sure. I doubt anyone wants to miss out on such a large sum."

Although most knight families held territory that generated enough money for them to live on, they weren't rich. Most knights would jump at the chance to earn fifty gold coins.

"What? You think some of them wouldn't want to be here otherwise?"

"We brought them here to witness a battle. We can't do anything about the change in objective, but I won't just make everyone go with the flow if it means risking their lives."

Back when we'd dropped the Molotovs, I'd made sure everyone who'd joined me understood that we might be killed. I always wanted everyone to have a choice.

"Well, if you think so. Personally, I think you worry too much."

"Do I?"

"Once war starts, knights don't get to choose whether or not to fight. Everyone knows it. Maybe it doesn't feel right to you, but everyone understands it's the career they've chosen."

I couldn't argue with that. It was the whole reason why being a knight came with special rights and privileges.

"But our unit wasn't dispatched on the orders of anyone high ranking. I had the option of turning the request down, and I'd like to give all the unit members that same choice," I replied.

In reality, no one had complete freedom to make their own choices—there were always factors like peer pressure preventing them from doing as they pleased. But even if offering the unit members a choice was just for show, it still

felt important to do it.

“Yeah, I understand that,” Liao said.

“Let the plainrunner company know. And don’t make them think they have to agree to anything.”

“All right.”

“Now... Let’s start talking about work,” I began. “Here’s a simple explanation of what I’ve got in mind. I expect it’ll take until noon to load all the food that’s going to be brought out from the castle, so let’s aim to have the refugees lined up outside the city by the afternoon. Liao, you haven’t seen what it’s like within the walls, have you? There are people carrying sacks and dressers full of belongings. Obviously, everyone has to leave everything except their most precious things behind. We can’t let people with large items set the pace.”

Liao frowned. He was probably realizing how troublesome this would all be.

“First, we need to bring the soldiers leaving the city under our command. There are three hundred of them, and... We’ve got twenty-four plainrunners, right?”

“That’s right,” Myalo replied.

That’s, let’s see...just over twelve soldiers per plainrunner. Could be a little too many.

“Let’s have the eagle company take in some of them too. Some of the eagles were in bad shape, weren’t they? Maybe we can ask someone at the castle to trade them for horses or plainrunners.”

The students would have to be compensated for their eagles later, but that was a reasonable expense. The castle’s soldiers were no longer capable of maneuver warfare, so they’d consider it a welcome trade. Whether the situation called for communication, reconnaissance, a suicide attack, or escape, eagles had countless uses.

“Then each of our unit members can have ten soldiers under their command. For convenience, we’ll call them squads.”

Unlike our own members, this group hadn’t been chosen for their ability. One

of our own would be able to keep ten of theirs in line.

“Anyone who’s particularly capable can have a few more soldiers under them. Let’s do our best to group people by age. Some of them look to be about nineteen. If those older soldiers are under one of our sixteen-year-old members, it’ll be a recipe for trouble.”

Liao nodded.

“Once that’s sorted, use them to perform checks at the city gate. Have them throw any large luggage away so we can get moving today.”

Liao raised his hand.

“Go ahead and speak.”

“If they’re throwing luggage away, there’ll be arguments. I don’t like the idea, but can they use their weapons to threaten people who refuse to give up their things?”

“I thought about that. We’ll give out food outside the walls.”

Liao looked surprised by that idea.

“Have it so they can see food being prepared while they’re giving up luggage. If we can show that we’ve got food to give out and no one’s going hungry, they’ll complain less about giving things up. And it’s best to feed people before they start walking, so it’s two birds with one stone.”

Now he looked impressed. “All right... That makes sense.”

“Okay. Now, are there any other questions or suggestions?”

I looked at Liao, Carol, and Myalo in turn, but none of them spoke.

“Okay then. Myalo, you can arrange the squads with Liao. I’ll go back to our former camp with Carol and ask around for people willing to give up their eagles.”



“These five are going to give up their eagles. With the exception of Guy, Dylan, Hack, and Mira, everyone keeping their eagle will head back to Shiyalta. Effie, I’m making you captain of the kingeagle company.”

Once I'd finished speaking, the kingeagle company's members all saluted me.

Of the five riders who'd accompanied me while dropping the firebombs, Effie was the one I considered most skilled. I knew the group would have no trouble crossing the bay.

"I'll trust you with these," I said while handing Effie a bundle of letters I'd written the night before. "Make sure they get delivered. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Sir. Please leave it to me. I'll make sure they do."

Besides us, all of the soldiers who'd come to Reforme from Shiyalta had already left. That meant that there weren't any other eagles that could carry messages back. It had to be up to these students to inform the people in Sibiak that Carol and I were alive. Needless to say, that was a heavy responsibility.

"All right... Now, the five of you trading your kingeagles need to head to the city gate."

Those remaining eagles weren't in good enough shape to fly across the bay. They weren't injured, but some moved a little awkwardly, as if they were suffering from minor aches and pains. Others were low on stamina from overwork. If they could rest in the castle while the army fought to defend the city, they'd be ready to fly once more. Obviously, we couldn't wait a week for them, though.

"Guy, fly to the castle and send word that we'd like to trade five of our eagles at the city gate. The other three of you should wait here and help the others prepare. Any questions?" I looked at everyone. No one said anything. "Good. Now prepare to move out."

As I rode my plainrunner back to the edge of the city, I found that they'd arranged their kingeagles and tethered them near the city gate.

The sun was high in the sky now. Outside the walls, I found that each unit member had their own squad, which they were giving commands to.

Myalo rode her horse over to me when she saw me approach. When she pulled the reins in an attempt to make the horse stop, it lifted its front legs off the ground, whinnied loudly, then halted.

“Whoa.”

She clearly hadn’t gotten used to it yet.

“Sorry about that,” she said.

“Are all of the squads assembled?”

“Yes. Twenty-nine of our members have ten soldiers under their command, and Giaume has his own squad of nine soldiers.”

I expected that at least a few of the three hundred soldiers would’ve deserted or gone wandering off somewhere, but surprisingly, every single one had come to the gate. Even more surprising was the news about Giaume.

“You gave him a squad?”

“Yes. Shouldn’t I have?”

Hmm... I guess it doesn’t matter.

“It’s fine. Now tell me whether we’ll be ready to give people food.”

“Preparing food for a thousand people is proving troublesome in many ways. We might have the soldiers arranged into squads of ten, but it’ll still be some time before they’re easily manageable.”

I’d expected that.

“I’ll take someone into the city with me to search for people among the refugees who know how to cook. Tell our unit members to start setting up tents and gathering pots and the like,” I replied.

“Ah, yes. Understood.”

Now that I’d finished giving Myalo her instructions, I turned my plainrunner around and headed toward Carol.

“Carol, take direct command of the five members who’re leaving their eagles behind. I doubt they’ve gotten used to taking orders from Liao—they’ll feel more comfortable with you.”

“Roger that.”

“I’m going to get Giaume to search for cooks with me. Where is he?”

“He’s with Liao. Over there.” Myalo, still sitting on her horse, pointed toward the area to the left of the city gates.

“Got it. All right, let’s get started.”

It appeared Liao had given Giaume’s squad the task of carrying luggage. They were moving wooden crates around.

“Liao, I’m borrowing these guys!” I called out from atop my plainrunner.

Liao, about ten meters away, waved at me in response to signal that I was welcome to take them.

“What now?” Giaume asked.

“The food is taking longer to prepare than expected, so we need to enter the city and find some refugees who are good at cooking. You’re going to help.”

“Ah... Sounds tough.”

I looked at the nine soldiers behind him. They all looked lazy; I couldn’t sense any willingness from this bunch. Still, they’d been trained well enough that they knew to stand up straight. Well, either that or they’d been threatened into behaving properly.

“You might be smart, but you’re not popular, are you?”

Giaume glared at me without saying anything. At least, that was how it looked to me. He didn’t seem like a troublemaker—if anything, I’d say he was a studious type who didn’t take great care of his personal appearance. There was a general air about him that made him difficult to approach, though.

“Well, that’s fine. Just come and help me anyway. What I need is a leader who’s familiar with the city.”

“Why do you want to make use of me so bad?” he asked.

It wasn’t like I had particularly high hopes for him. I was just having some fun with him since he stood out so much. If it turned out he was actually someone capable, I didn’t want him to go to waste.

“Don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not set on making use of you. If you do a bad

job, I'll find someone else."

That said, I really *was* putting a lot of extra work on him for no reason. I had to feel a little sorry for him. He was getting paid the same as everyone else, yet I was making him do management work.

"Work hard until the end, and I'll write some sort of letter of recommendation for you," I assured him.

"A letter of recommendation? No thanks."

Okay, I guess he doesn't want one.

"In any case, if you're coming with us, then obey my orders. If you want to leave, I'll give the job to someone else. Now follow me."

We passed through the gate and into the mass of refugees. I took out several gold coins from my purse and put them in my pocket.

"Hey, take this." I threw my purse to Giaume. "Give one coin to every cook you employ."

The purse landed in Giaume's hands with a *thud*. He looked at it, and then at me. "You're sure? You might just lose your money."

I assumed that he meant he himself might run off with the entire purse.

"Do you have to argue about everything? I have to trust people to *some* extent."

If I was too scared to let anyone control our money in case they ran off with it, they'd be forced to work with limited resources, and we'd never get anything done. Besides, letting him take care of a little money like this wasn't a bad idea—it was also a way of testing him.

When Giaume showed reluctance to carry a purse with dozens of gold coins in it, it was probably because of how heavy it was. Caph had even given himself a bad back from having heavy purses like this hanging from his waist all year round.

"Hmph," Giaume muttered.

"Let's get searching. We need to do this quickly. I'll see if I can find anyone

over that way.”

“Yes, Sir,” Giaume agreed.

I turned my plainrunner around and rode away.

Behind me, I could hear Giaume giving orders to his squad. “Everyone listen up. We need to find some cooks.”

I moved slowly, looking at what each refugee was carrying.

They weren’t short on food, so very few of them had the sunken cheeks that marked the starving people in Sibiak.

If only someone was carrying a big pot, I’d know they were a cook. Hmm...

I studied the people more carefully and saw that many were with children; quite a few were carrying babies. We certainly couldn’t tell people that these little ones were useless luggage to be left behind, so we’d have to reserve one of our wagons for carrying the infants.

The wagons would gradually empty as we ate the food, so there’d possibly be space to carry people instead if they found it hard to keep walking later on.

“Hm?”

For some reason, someone caught my eye. They were wearing a dark gray—really, almost black—cloth that went over their head and shoulders. That wasn’t particularly rare, except that the cloth was exceptionally high quality. Green lace had been carefully sewn into the edges. Fine thread like that took a lot of time and effort to be embroidered onto clothing.

Is that someone from a witch family who didn’t flee yet? I wondered as I moved closer to see their face. *I just hope they’re not an assassin.*

When I was close enough to get a better look, I decided that their body wasn’t shaped like a woman’s. Their clothing was also made for a man, and they looked a little muscular.

“Hey, you. Uncover your head,” I commanded while taking hold of my crutch, which I always carried—even while riding.

“Ngh?”

“You with the fine cloth covering your head. You know who you are.”

There was some movement from within the cloth. I could tell from the way his profile changed that he was moving his right arm toward his left hip. He was about to draw a weapon. When his right arm moved again, I positioned my crutch, ready to counter the movement that I knew was coming.

A moment later, he attempted to draw his blade and slash at my legs with one quick movement.

Unfortunately for him, I jabbed my crutch forcefully into his wrist before he had the chance. The impact made him release his grip on his dagger and sent it flying through the air. As expected, it didn't feel like I'd just hit some woman's thin arm. I instantly moved the crutch upward, hitting him in the head and knocking away the cloth.

I confirmed that it was a man, and not just any man—I knew him.

“I've disarmed him! Hold him down!” I yelled.

After a moment's hesitation, some of the men in the crowd threw themselves at him. There was a short scuffle that ended with him pinned down on the ground.

“You... You're Jaco Yoda.”

It felt like a lifetime ago, but I'd met him the first time I'd visited Reforme. He was the idiot who'd demanded I give him Stardust. As a member of the royal guard, there was no way he'd been given permission to leave the city before the fighting started. Besides, he looked over thirty, so he was too old to be sent away with the youngsters. It was highly likely that he was deserting.

This bastard. He talks like a big shot, then runs at the first sign of a fight. I should kill him right now.

For a moment, I seriously considered executing him on the spot, but ultimately decided it wasn't a good idea because of the effect it would have on the refugees.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” I asked him.

I figured I'd better let him speak in case he'd been given special permission

from the royal family.

“You don’t have the right to arrest me! Untie me right now!” he cried. He’d failed to give me an excuse.

“Gag him,” I said. “I don’t want to hear him.”

The men around him quickly stuffed a rag into his mouth.

“He’s a deserter from the royal guard. We’ll have to hand him to the castle guards. Call a soldier over—it doesn’t matter who.”

Jaco thrashed his head violently and spat out the rag. “You don’t have any right to judge me! You’re all cowards! You abandoned us the second we started losing!”

This guy must have something wrong with his brain. I won’t be doing the judging. I just said we’re handing him over to Kilhina.

The rag was forced back into his mouth a moment later.

“Beat him to within an inch of his life if you feel like it,” I told the men holding him. “He’ll be executed soon anyway.”

No sooner than I’d finished speaking, the men around Jaco actually *did* start to assault him. They clearly hated deserters much more than I did.

In the meantime, someone had brought over a city soldier.

“As you can see, this idiot thought he could blend in with the crowd and escape. I don’t know where he’s stationed, but he’s Jaco Yoda, a knight of the royal guard.”

“Ah...” the soldier said. “So I see. I’ll take him away.”

“Please do.”

Jaco glared at me, full of resentment, as he was escorted toward the castle.



A mountain of belongings had formed by the city gates. Looking into the city from outside, I couldn’t see many people left.

By now, most people had left Reforme and surrendered their luggage as they

passed through the gate, keeping nothing but their most precious things and the tools they needed to make a living. Once they'd been given food and felt ready to start walking, the people had formed into groups, each with a squad to protect them as they traveled.

But for now, cooking smoke was still rising from the temporary tents we'd set up.

"I've brought her."

It wasn't until 4 p.m. that we'd finally managed to get everyone—all of one thousand of them—out of the city.

That was when the royal swo—uh, the nightcloak, brought Tellur to me. The nightcloak was wearing ordinary clothes, while Tellur was in a thick hooded robe. It looked plain enough.

I took another look around me to check that no one was close enough to hear our conversation. "All right, I'll take her."

"Please take good care of her," the nightcloak said, bowing her head low.

Tellur, meanwhile, simply stood on the spot. After a short delay, she bowed her head too. "Oh... Um, hello..."

She looked exhausted. When she raised her head back up, I caught a glimpse of her blonde hair under the hood.

"Uh, this is supposed to be dyed black," I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Tellur took a step back like I'd scared her, then she held down her hood to hide her hair.

What's going on here?

The nightcloak didn't respond. She looked like she was at a loss for words. I could guess the situation from the expression on her face, more or less.

Fine, I'll live with it.

It would be the people of Reforme, not me, who'd suffer if anyone learned her identity. Plus, she'd made it out of the city already anyway.

“It doesn’t bother me, but...some of the refugees won’t feel the same way. Keep your hood up. I’d recommend cutting your hair short too.”

Tellur glared at me like she couldn’t believe what I was saying.

Whoops. She just decided I’m her enemy, didn’t she? Feels like I just stood on a cat’s tail. I guess she’ll be wary around me for some time. I didn’t think she’d be this infantile. This reminds me of my first year at the Knight Academy.

“Okay, you can leave that way.”

I gave up worrying about it. She’d just cause more trouble if I forced her to cut her hair. Besides, it wouldn’t be my problem if she finished this trip with some bad memories.

“You’ll find someone named Hinami Weerts among the refugees. Please allow her to take responsibility for the lady’s general care.”

What? Why wasn’t this Hinami woman with Tellur from the start? Was that another decision for the sake of keeping everything secret?

If an ordinary caretaker had been by Tellur’s side the whole time, she would’ve known all about the plan to get her out of the city. Then she might have leaked the news to others. That was one possible explanation as to why they’d made the caretaker wear ordinary clothes and leave Reforme with the rest of the refugees, only to be reemployed by Tellur later.

What a pain. Everything about this task is awkward. They go through all this trouble, and yet the most important thing—dyeing her hair—didn’t happen because Tellur wouldn’t cooperate.

“I sense you find the arrangement difficult,” the nightcloak said with a bow of her head.

“No... If you somehow survive all this, you’ll always be welcome with the Ho family,” I replied. “We’ll find a suitable post for you.”

“If somehow that does happen, I’d want to work where I’m close to Princess Tellur.”

Loyal down to her very core. I suppose that’s a way of life for people like her. That’s worth my respect.

“I suppose I didn’t think that offer through. All right, I’ll look after Tellur.”

“Thank you. Once again, please take good care of her.”

The nightcloak turned toward Tellur, crouched in front of her, and gripped both of her hands.

“Lady Tellur, please avoid danger, and remain true to yourself for as long as you live. I wish you every happiness.”

“Yes... You too Yanya. Stay safe and don’t die...”

“I won’t...”

The nightcloak—Yanya—stood up once more. “Goodbye,” she said with one last bow of her head before she turned and left us.

Tellur spent some time watching her walk away.

“Lady Tellur, are you ready to leave?” I tried asking after a few minutes.

“Yes.”

“Then please come to me.” I extended my hand.

Tellur didn’t take it; she seemed fearful of me.

Okay, fine. I withdrew my hand. “Okay, please follow after me.”

“Dolla.”

He really gets me down.

“Yuri... I mean, Captain.”

Dolla was working with the ten soldiers under his command as they organized our cargo. At that moment, they were tightly binding bales of hay and throwing them onto a wagon carrying food for the horses.

“We need to talk. Come here for a minute.”

“All right,” he said while throwing in another hay bale. He turned to his squad and yelled out, “I’m going to talk to the captain! Take a break after you’re done loading the feed!”

“Well, aren’t you a fine squad leader?”

“Yeah, maybe... Who’s that?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you in a moment,” I replied. Then, I turned to Tellur and told her, “Wait here a minute.”

She nodded her head slightly, then stood rigidly still by the side of a wagon.

Okay, that’ll do.

We moved a little away from her to talk in private.

“So, this is a little hard to say, but...”

Before I could finish, Dolla raised his hand to silence me. “Let me say something first.”

What?

“Yuri, thank you for bringing Her Highness back to us.”

Whoa.

“I felt it was all so much that I couldn’t take it. I’ve never felt that way about anything before.”

Wow.

I cut him off. “Hold up. You know, I wasn’t sure whether I should mention it to you, but...”

I was worried that if I’d let Dolla keep talking, he was going to say something like, “I’ve finally realized how I feel about Her Highness, and now I’m going to confess my love to her.” I figured I’d better break the news about us first before that happened.

“What?”

“It’s me and Carol... Things happened between us. As a man and a woman.”

“Oh...” Dolla’s smile froze. He’d been grinning like I’d never seen before, but now that expression was frozen stiff.

“Sorry.” The emotions inside me grew so strong that I couldn’t help but bow my head to him.

“Why apologize? Hold on. Did you force yourself on—”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Ugh. O-Okay.”

“Punch me if you want,” I told him.

“No.”

Dolla looked utterly deflated. *Poor guy.*

“Make Her Highness happy,” Dolla said, as if he was her dad.

Making Carol happy was a lot to ask of me. It would mean protecting Shiyalta and bringing prosperity to the kingdom—that was, ensuring its stability. Maybe it’d be an easy task if Shiyalta had two or three centuries in which to grow, but things were looking grim at that moment. Since I wasn’t a god, I couldn’t promise I’d be up to the task. If the kingdom ever approached the verge of collapse, my only option would be to render Carol unconscious and escape with her by ship. I supposed there wasn’t a point in explaining that to Dolla, though.

Instead, I settled for a vague response. “Yeah...”

“Is that all you had to say?” he asked.

“No, I wanted to ask you to do something. But if you say it’s too much, I’ll ask someone else.”

“Who do you think I am? Give me an order and I’ll do it,” he replied like I’d just offended him.

I tried to behave like a respectable statesman who never mixed his personal interests with official business, but that approach could make me cold and calculating. I had to take into account the fact that Dolla had been in love with Carol. If the news I’d just given him left him low on morale for a while, I wouldn’t criticize him for it.

“It’s an important mission. You can’t handle it if you’re going to be moping around for days to come.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then I’ll say it—we’ve got someone special with us.” I jerked my head back a little to gesture toward Princess Tellur behind me. “That’s the Kilhinan princess.

We have to get her to Shiyalta. I want you to guard the wagon that's going to carry the princess along with a certain treasure."

"What...?" Dolla muttered. He knitted his brow and glared at me. "Asshole!"

He grabbed me by my clothing. His furious grip was so tight that he was lifting me off the ground.

What the...? Why's he mad?

"What are you playing at?!" he yelled. "Is this your idea of making it up to me?!"

Huh? What's he talking about? Oh...I get it. I'm giving him another blonde girl.

I was surprised that Dolla had even noticed her hair while it was hidden under her hood. Maybe it stood out to him because it was his fetish... Or maybe he'd just noticed her blue eyes.

"You can't be serious. Get your hands off me. If you keep asking bullshit questions, I'll kill you." I reached for the handle of the dagger at my waist.

Since Dolla was gripping my collar, there was a risk of him throwing me or pushing me down, but I'd be ready to counter him with my blade. The moment he tried anything, I'd draw the dagger from its sheath and use one swift movement to move it up to his armpit while he still had his hands at my collar, then I'd thrust it into that vulnerable region.

But Dolla let go of me, and my feet touched back down on the ground.

I took my hand away from my dagger and straightened my clothes. "Shit-for-brains. You think I'd choose you for a job this important out of pity for you?"

Dolla had proved himself as hot-headed as ever. Still, that was partly what made him popular—to anyone who thought daring and courage were virtues for a knight, that is.

"Then why'd you pick me?" he asked.

"Because you're strong, obviously. I'm putting the wagon that holds the princess and the treasure under your squad's full control. You'll defend the wagon containing the princess with your life."

Because of how stupid he was, this sort of straightforward mission suited him well. And given the way he'd just flipped out, I knew he hadn't lost any of his usual vigor.

"But of course, if you don't think you can do it, I'll choose someone else," I added.

"I'll do it."

So he's fine with it after all?

"Okay then. I'll go let Liao know. You can start by introducing yourself to our little princess."



"Liao."

Liao turned around when I called to him from atop my plainrunner.

"Hey, Yuri. The last of them are about to start moving."

I got down off my plainrunner so he wouldn't have to look up at me while we talked.

"All right. I've put Dolla's squad in charge of guarding you-know-what. It'll be easiest if we put our most precious item and person in the same wagon."

"Hm..." Liao nodded. "Yeah, that works. The royal family would be mad at us if anything happened to either of them."

"We've still got the wagon I brought for carrying gunpowder. We can use that one."

"Ah, I remember it."

The gunpowder wagon was a new one from Ho Company, so it had state-of-the-art suspension. Despite its new design, though, it still made use of wooden plate springs. Still, it would provide some comfort, and it had a sturdy canopy originally chosen to protect the gunpowder.

"But that wagon's already left, loaded with other supplies," Liao said.

"Okay. In that case, do you mind if I tell Dolla to head out with his current wagon right now?"

“Sure, that’s no problem. We’ll be heading out ourselves soon.”

Dolla had just gotten done loading a wagon with hay. Anyone sitting in there would be comfortable enough for now.

Chapter 3 — The Battle of Olt River

I

It had been the morning of June 20th when Angelica heard the news.

At the time, Ange had been taking part in the attack on Reforme, Kilhina Kingdom's capital. And, as always, she had been forced to accept a supporting role.

Five days after scouts had first reached Reforme, the army had surrounded the city walls with a perfect siege. Not a single rat could have escaped, but the offensive had yet to begin.

Ange's reputation among the crusade forces had grown thanks to the siege cannon she'd proposed, which had been crucial during the attack on the mountain fortress. However, officers from Tyrelme still treated her as coldly as ever. Ange had been sitting in her camp, wondering why she was always treated that way, when one of her subordinates arrived to deliver news to her.

"A deserter, you say?"

"Yes, My Lady," had been the polite response from the soldier who'd just returned from his patrol.

"What about him? Is he an important noble?"

"He is not. However...he made an unusual offer to sell information to us."

He thinks we'll buy information?

"Just sounds like another long-eared spouting nonsense."

There was no need to buy information—there were other ways to get it. Torturing captives to their breaking point and beyond was an effortless process, and there was certainly no rule against it. Given the current imbalance of power, trades of any kind simply didn't make sense.

"All right, I'll talk to him," Ange had said.

Rather than Ange going to the captive, however, he was brought before her tent.

Ange looked him in the eye. She thought she saw fear, but then she realized it was more than that—they were the eyes of a hungry parasite. There was also something about the long-eared's sitting posture that suggested arrogance. Such an attitude could only stem from some wholly misguided confidence.

He had well-proportioned features, as was typical of the Shanti, yet there was nothing attractive about him. Ange hated the man the moment she laid eyes on him.

"If I misspeak, correct me," she said to the interpreter she'd brought with her to the crusade.

The interpreter was a male long-eared dressed in a brown robe. The tattoo on his face marked him as distinct from an ordinary slave. Long ago, he'd taught the Shanish language to Ange.

"Yes, My Lady. As you wish."

Ange nodded to the interpreter, then turned back to the captive. "So you're the one who wants to sell information?" Ange asked in Shanish.

"Straight to the point. That's right." His tone was blunt and confident. He really seemed to believe a deal was possible.

"And what would you have in return?" Ange asked him.

"I want you creatures—I mean, you people—to let me live freely in their territory with a large enough salary to be comfortable."

Fool, Ange thought. She barely stopped herself from laughing aloud.

There *were* recorded cases of Shanti slaves who'd used their exceptional talent to rise up to become close associates of kings, but even they hadn't been able to live freely. And this one wanted *a salary* too. His understanding of the world was no better than a child's.

"If you have the right information, then perhaps. But I can't guarantee anything until I know what value your information holds."

That was a lie, of course—she wasn't going to guarantee any kind of treatment for him no matter what he knew. Ange didn't like to do it, even when talking to a loathsome long-eared, but he'd be tortured to a miserable death unless he talked. One way or another, he'd give up that information eventually.

"That sounds fair enough. I'm offering to tell you the whereabouts of a blonde Shanti and the dragon slayer who escaped you," he said, with no further efforts to bargain.

"Hmm..." The information was of particular interest to Ange, but she quickly came up with another lie. This was too important for her to handle alone. "Unfortunately, I don't know how important that information is. You'll have to talk to my superior."

Ange held no real power within the crusade forces. It had just been a coincidence that this particular long-eared had been picked up by one of her patrols. If she were the only one to receive information from him—thanks to a few cheap promises—then the intel she shared might not be treated with the importance it deserved.

There was also the possibility that her lies would only get him to talk once, after which he might stay quiet. He might even make things difficult by demanding a written agreement before he'd repeat the same statements in front of others.

If possible, Ange wanted someone with a higher rank within the crusade forces to hear the information with her.

She immediately escorted the man, who called himself Jaco Yoda, to the Papal State's tent.

Although her older brother was the emperor of her home country, Angelica chose to take the Shanti to the leader of the Papal State's forces. The sad fact was that the creep from the Papal State held her in higher regard than anyone else. If she had taken the prisoner to her brother Alfred, he would've ignored her, and the opportunity to gain information was likely to be squandered.

"Excuse me."

When Ange arrived, Epitaph Palazzo, the war minister leading the Volunteer Knight Order, was praying inside a tent serving as a makeshift temple.

“Oh, Lady Angelica. What brings you here?” Epitaph rose from his kneeling position and turned to face her.

“An interesting Shanti surrendered himself to us, so I brought him to you... I hope I haven’t interrupted your prayer.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“That’s a relief. The captive claims to know the whereabouts of a blonde Shanti.”

“Oh. That’s most interesting.”

“Indeed. That’s why I brought him to you.”

“Well, we must interrogate him at once.”

Interrogate? He must mean torture.

“There’s no need. He says he’ll talk in exchange for favorable treatment.”

“Treatment?”

“He wants to live freely within our territories, and he wants money.”

“Pfft.” Epitaph burst out laughing. He seemed really entertained by the thought, like he’d just heard a good joke. “Hah, ah hah... That’s an amusing idea. Freedom for a demon. He must be confused.”

“Indeed, but a few false promises might get the information out of him easier than torture.”

“Yes, you may be right,” Epitaph agreed.

Torture essentially meant causing a subject great suffering while repeatedly asking them to tell everything they knew. Unfortunately, the information extracted that way was often unreliable.

If one was fortunate enough to capture someone with the right information, then torture was an ideal method for extracting it from them. But it was often unclear whether the subject had all the answers they sought. The torturer couldn’t just believe the subject when they claimed ignorance in response to a

question, so they'd have to continue making them suffer. The subject might then answer the question by making things up, hoping to make the torture stop. If the torturer had no way to verify the information, they might then fall for the subject's lies.

All a torturer could do was cause pain. They couldn't determine when someone was holding information back, or when someone without information was making it up.

Torturing someone who knew nothing in the first place would result in them giving nothing but false information as they tried to escape the pain, which might be taken as fact. This was actually a common problem. Something like instructions for cracking a coded message could easily be verified, but an army's plans couldn't be so easily checked. If one's own army then acted on the false information, the consequences could be serious.

"He's waiting outside," Angelica said. "Please allow me to take you to him."

Despite its simplicity, this tent was a temple. It wouldn't be an appropriate place to interrogate someone.

"Very well."

Ange and Epitaph both stepped outside.

Outside the tent, the man was kneeling on the ground, his arms bound behind his back. With him were two of Ange's soldiers and the interpreter.

The interpreter had idly placed his left hand on the frame of the tent and was half leaning against it, but he soon stood up straight when he saw Ange and Epitaph emerge.

"Is this person your interpreter?" Epitaph asked.

"That's correct. He's with me."

The interpreter tattoo was widely recognized across the world. In addition to being the mark of a slave, it signified that he'd mastered two languages and could speak them without ever sounding unnatural. Even slave hunters, who were more or less kidnappers, wouldn't touch anyone with this tattoo. Interpreters were always owned by influential nobles, military officers, or slave

traders who often needed their services. Anyone who tried to steal such a slave would face reprisals from the owner.

“Place your arm out,” Epitaph said to the interpreter.

“Hm? As you wish, Sir.”

“Not that one. The left arm.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The interpreter lowered his right arm and raised the left.

“It is an affront for a demon like yourself to touch this consecrated temple. I must administer justice in my capacity as war minister.”

Epitaph suddenly drew the saber at his waist. Ange quickly guessed what he was about to do—he was going to cut off the interpreter’s arm. It came as a shock to Ange because Epitaph hadn’t appeared angry at all.

“Lord Epitaph!” she cried. “This is my own interpreter. Please forgive him.”

Epitaph knitted his brow. “Lady Angelica... You’re a gentle soul. In most circumstances, the correct course of action would be to execute a demon who defiled a sacred temple.”

As Ange suspected, he’d been offended by the long-eared’s actions. As always, she struggled to read him.

“If we accept that there’s no sin in ignorance, then the mistake is mine for failing to inform him that the tent was a temple. For my sake, please, overlook his transgression.”

The teaching of no sin in ignorance came from a parable in the Book of Noc in which Yeesus forgave a child who stole fruit without realizing he’d done it. Since there hadn’t been anything outside to indicate that the tent was a temple, Ange herself hadn’t realized it until she stepped inside. That made the interpreter even more innocent than the boy from the parable. It was as if he’d picked up a rock, only to find he’d stolen a piece of fruit. It would be too cruel to cut off his arm over this.

“Hm...”

“What’s more, if you injure him, I’ll be forced to send for a new one.”

She looked at the interpreter. He’d figured out what was going on and was now down on the floor begging for forgiveness. That was wise.

“Out of respect for you, Lady Angelica, I will forgive him this time,” Epitaph said, perhaps feeling somewhat satisfied by the interpreter’s groveling.

“Thank you.”

“Now, this must be the demon you mentioned,” Epitaph said as he looked down at the captive.

Unable to understand what anyone was saying, Jaco Yoda appeared utterly confused as he knelt there with his arms bound.

“That’s correct.”

“Translate for me,” Epitaph told the interpreter.

Epitaph of the Papal State’s army no doubt had his own interpreter, but he was using Ange’s at that moment.

“You can get up,” Ange told him, and the interpreter slowly and fearfully got to his feet.

“State your demand,” Epitaph said. The interpreter quickly repeated Epitaph’s words to Jaco Yoda in Shanish.

“As I said before, I want to live a free life in your lands, with a high enough salary to be comfortable.” This time the interpreter translated Jaco Yoda’s words to Kulatish and relayed them to Epitaph.

“Very well. I’ll see to it that you’re recognized as a noble, and your requests granted. Now tell us everything you know.”

“All right. It’s a promise? Then I’ll tell you.”



“...and they set out from here six days ago. They’re probably following the main coastal roads to avoid running into your army in the north.”

All the information the man gave, from start to finish, was surprisingly valuable. To Ange’s surprise, the one who’d brought down the dragon was the

eldest son of the Ho family—a name familiar to her—and he'd been with a blonde princess. No one could have guessed that. The one that got away turned out to be a bigger fish than they'd ever imagined.

“And this is just a rumor, but I think this kingdom's princess escaped with them too.”

“Oh... You mean Princess Tellur?” Epitaph asked.

Ange was a little surprised to learn that Epitaph had actually memorized the name of this kingdom's royalty.

“Exactly. She's one of those blonde princesses that your kind love so much.” Jaco Yoda's mouth twisted into a disgusting sneer. “In fact, that's the whole reason I escaped. I said I wasn't going to obey a royal family whose chief concern was getting themselves to safety.”

He was running his mouth now, saying things that no one had asked him about.

“Now tell us about the state of the city and how you escaped,” Ange said. Since they were talking through the interpreter, Ange decided it was better to ask in Kulatish rather than Shanish.

Anything they learned about the city might actually prove more important than anything else he could tell them. They might even learn something that would aid their assault.

The interpreter relayed the question.

“Well... I don't know much.”

“Why not?”

“I got out during the night while avoiding everyone. Though the rope I used to get down from the city wall is probably still there... Or maybe someone removed it already.”

Given how easily he'd been giving up information, he clearly wasn't holding anything back out of fear of betraying his people.

If what he'd just said was true, then he hadn't been a city guard who could leave the city at will, Ange thought. More likely, he'd been held in the dungeon

and then found a chance to escape amid the turmoil of war. Someone who'd fled and tried to avoid detection wouldn't have a chance to talk to anyone. He wouldn't even have had the opportunity to step out onto the main streets or approach the city gates to see what had been going on there. In short, Jaco Yoda wouldn't know what was going on around the castle, and he wouldn't have learned the city's weaknesses.

"Lady Ange, have you more questions for the creature?"

"No." She'd asked all she cared to know.

"Well then." Epitaph drew his sword and cut the man's throat without warning.

"Nghuh..." The man stared at Epitaph with disbelief. Next, it was Ange he looked at with the same expression.

He tried to talk, but the words wouldn't come out because blood filled his airway. He was clutching at his throat with his hands, but he had so little strength left that it accomplished nothing. The cut went more than halfway through his neck, after all. His face, meanwhile, was still full of expression. He glared at Ange with eyes that burned with hatred.

To prevent the blood from spraying toward him, Epitaph gave Jaco Yoda a gentle kick to his chest, causing him to fall onto his back. Now he was looking at the sky instead of Ange, and a few moments later, he stopped moving.

Ange wasn't about to ask something like, *Didn't you promise to make him a noble?* That would've been a stupid question. But if his information had been correct, Ange had planned to at least take him outside the siege and let him go. She realized now that there'd never been any chance of that from the moment she'd gotten Epitaph involved.

Feeling somewhat responsible, Ange was left sickened by the whole ordeal.



Representatives from each nation had gathered for a crusader's war council. Though few sovereigns attended, princes of various kinds were right at home. It was exceedingly rare for so many nobles of this caliber to be gathered in one place.

Only the Euphos Federation lacked a representative at the council. Their forces had gone to a city to the north to ensure that the siege of Reforme couldn't be broken from behind by the city's soldiers.

Once the council's regular announcements had concluded, Epitaph Palazzo raised his hand.

It was Emperor Alfred—the highest-ranking person there—who acknowledged him. “Lord Epitaph, you may speak.”

Epitaph was sitting directly to the right of Alfred, who himself was sitting at the very top of the long table. That meant Epitaph had the second-highest seat.

“Lady Angelica captured a demon a short while ago. We interrogated him together and were able to extract important information. I'd like for Lady Angelica to explain the rest.”

At this, Ange stood up. “Please allow me to explain. First, I'll have to go back some way and talk about the dragon slayer who we failed to apprehend. We have determined that he's the nephew of the one who killed Emperor Alfred's father—who is, of course, also my own father—Lenizicht Sacramenta.”

The news made the atmosphere at the council turn tense.

“Politically, he's an important individual set to inherit a region to the south of the Shiyalta Kingdom, known as Ho Province. It's home to the Shiyalta Kingdom's most fertile soils, and the Ho family is one of the most—no, *the* most powerful family in the kingdom. Moreover, we've learned that he was accompanied by Princess Carol of Shiyalta's royal family.”

The council attendees began to murmur to one another. They had difficulty accepting such an incredible claim so readily. In fact, it seemed to have struck the attendees as absurd.

“It seems you have questions,” Ange noted.

The man who raised his hand in response was Fritz Ronnie from the Galilee Union.

Like many dispatched from Galilee, he was born a commoner. Though he had many decorations, his title was nothing but an honorary one that made him a

knight. For that reason, he was sitting near the bottom of the table, close to Ange.

There was a perceptive look in Fritz's eyes. Eyes like those typically belonged to merchants looking for opportunities to win over kings—they saw through to the true nature of things.

"Please go ahead," Ange said.

"Lady Angelica, you're more knowledgeable about the state of the Shiyalta Kingdom than anyone else here. My question to you is simple: Why is the kingdom's princess at the front line?"

It was an obvious question to ask. A princess would normally be raised in safety, secluded in some tower.

Though Ange knew much about many nations, she couldn't possibly gain a deep understanding of the personality of every insignificant royal child from Shiyalta and Kilhina. She was genuinely at a loss to explain why a princess would visit the front line.

"I don't know for sure, but perhaps she...has a personality like mine."

Although their circumstances were very different, Ange and Carol were both princesses who'd set out to the front line. The remark was taken half in jest, producing a wave of subdued laughter among the attendees.

"Ah, I understand," Fritz Ronnie replied before withdrawing the hand he'd rested on the table and leaning back against his chair's backrest. His gesture had made it clear that he was done talking and had no further questions.

Ange waited a few moments to be sure that no one would ask anything else.

"Now, if I may continue. We were told that the pair arrived in Reforme in the evening seven days ago, and the following day they both departed for Shiyalta with a party consisting of Kilhina's princess, a thousand civilians, and three hundred soldiers."

Silence immediately replaced the once heated atmosphere of the council.

Two blonde princesses and a key noble from an enemy nation had escaped—it was bad news. In addition, they'd lost a great number of defenseless civilians

they could have enslaved. The temptation to pursue this walking source of treasure was undeniable, but the task was too great if they'd left six days ago.

The targets would be slowed down by the civilians they were dragging along with them. If they'd only had a day or two head start, a horse might have been able to run the entire distance and catch up with them before it needed rest. Unfortunately, a six-day head start meant that any pursuers would need substantial supplies to support them.

And, of course, all would be lost if they managed to catch up, only to be defeated. To go after three hundred soldiers, six hundred soldiers would need to be dispatched. Considerable effort would be required to provide provisions to such a force of mounted soldiers. And even in that case, there was no guarantee that the target would be captured.

Though it looked like a golden opportunity, the chance had already passed. There were too many problems from a logistical perspective. This conclusion was so obvious that agreement quickly spread through the members of the council.

"Lady Angelica, thank you," Epitaph said. "Please sit down."

Ange took her seat once more.

"I propose that we, the Papal State, go after them," Epitaph said.

There was more murmuring among the attendees. Some made no attempt to hide their frowns. It was also the first time Ange had heard Epitaph's proposal.

"I'll take a thousand of our elite soldiers. It would seem that the three hundred soldiers the enemy chose were the youngest in the city. A thousand members of the Volunteer Knight Order will crush them with ease," Epitaph declared confidently.

What he said was true. Many of the youngsters would be poorly trained, and they'd have no experience fighting as a group. An army that had been hastily gathered, then set out the next day might be weaker than an army of conscripted peasants.

Unlike ordinary soldiers from the Papal State, the soldiers of the Volunteer Knight Order under Epitaph's command were an elite unit that served the pope

directly. It was a force with unparalleled proficiency and morale that stuck to the old traditions of the Xurxes Holy Empire. If Jaco Yoda had spoken the truth, then a thousand members of the Volunteer Knight Order would be more than enough. In fact, a surprise attack with merely a *hundred* of their healthy soldiers might have sufficed.

Unfortunately, things weren't that simple. The question was how far the targets could be chased. Although the target's speed was unknown, the pursuit would surely involve venturing far into territory that was still controlled by the enemy.

As inferior as the target might have been, there was very obvious danger in pursuing them. For example, soldiers that had fled following defeat in previous battles could be secretly reassembling in some new location at that very moment. No matter how elite the pursuing force was, there was a risk it would be lost if it happened to clash with a large gathering of enemy soldiers while they were deep within enemy territory.

"Since Lady Angelica is familiar with the roads that lead deeper into enemy territory, I'd like to take her with me. Would that be acceptable?" Epitaph turned slightly to look at Alfred, then smiled.

That's not the question he should be asking, Ange thought.

Epitaph had just made a request to borrow Angelica—an officer who was part of the forces under Alfred's command. But for this operation to even take place, he'd need permission from Alfred, the supreme commander here. Unless Epitaph broke the long-standing rules that came into effect whenever a crusade force was assembled, the operation couldn't happen at all without Alfred's approval.

Under the proper protocol, Epitaph should have been asking whether he could pursue the enemy, not whether Angelica could go with him. In effect, Epitaph had already gone over Alfred's head when he announced his intentions.

But Alfred had nothing to gain by opposing Epitaph here. Epitaph was a powerful political figure, and Alfred wouldn't want him as an enemy. Additionally, if the Papal State's forces went elsewhere, it would save Alfred from listening to their demands.

Though Ange hoped her brother would say no, she was smart enough to predict that he'd agree.

Alfred sat in silence and thought for a while. Finally, he said, "You have my approval."

After the council ended, Ange followed Epitaph to the Papal State's camp.

"Lord Epitaph, please reconsider," she immediately said after they'd entered his tent.

"Why?" Epitaph replied as he sat down on a large wooden chair that certainly couldn't have been easily carried here. There was no hint of surprise at the question in his eyes.

"The objective requires us to advance too far. You'll be putting yourself at risk."

Ange wasn't actually concerned in the slightest about Epitaph's safety; she was concerned for herself. If Epitaph took her with him and marched into danger, she would be at risk too.

Unfortunately, she had no right to refuse. Since Alfred wanted Ange dead, he wouldn't stop Epitaph from taking her on a dangerous mission. If she tried explaining to Alfred just how dangerous this pursuit was, he would be overjoyed. It would be all the more reason for her to accompany Epitaph. Ange's only option was to talk Epitaph out of it.

"I have no desire to die by playing into a demon's hands. I have a plan," he stated.

A plan?

"We'll travel by ship. We have enough to spare, and we can't catch up without one."

It was going to be a landing operation. A ship would certainly put them at an advantage.

A temporary harbor had been made close to Reforme by joining empty barrels together to create floating piers, and numerous ships had dropped

anchor close by. Many of them were going unused.

Though it was beyond Ange, Epitaph easily had enough political influence to ensure they could take a ship for themselves.

“If the wind is right, we’ll be able to head them off where the peninsula narrows,” he continued.

“Are you able to make free use of the fleet?” Ange asked him.

“Naturally, I can’t commandeer every ship, but I won’t have trouble securing enough to carry a thousand men.”

“I believe it would only take a healthy individual ten days to travel the distance from Reforme to the border on foot,” Ange warned.

They needed to get ahead of them despite their six-day head start. A group slowed by refugees wouldn’t move anywhere near as fast as a group of men with strong legs, but even so, such a head start was substantial.

If Epitaph were to go all the way to the border, they’d encounter an army from the Shiyalta Kingdom—a thousand soldiers wouldn’t be enough to deal with that.

And while a ship might be faster than a horse when the wind was blowing hard enough to strain its sails, any ship that wasn’t fitted with oars would come to a stop once the wind died down.

“We don’t know how it’ll go until we try.”

Epitaph spoke like an enlightened monk sharing his insights. He didn’t show the slightest hint of doubt; he’d clearly made up his mind and wasn’t going to budge from his insistence that it was worth a try.

“Very well. In that case, I’ll accompany you.”

It wasn’t like she had a choice, and staying here would just mean continuing the same patrols. Though success seemed unlikely, it would be an incredible achievement if she followed Epitaph and managed to capture both the heir to the Ho family and two princesses.

“I’d like to offer one suggestion,” she added.

“Which is?”

“No matter how quick we are, it’ll take a day or two to board the soldiers and load our supplies. I propose we send a gunboat ahead to destroy the bridge.”

A gunboat was a recently invented form of warship that carried large cannons. They were developed by the Albio Republic—a nation known for its pirate activity. Such cannons had first been fitted to merchant ships after many had been attacked and sunk. The same idea was later adopted by military ships.

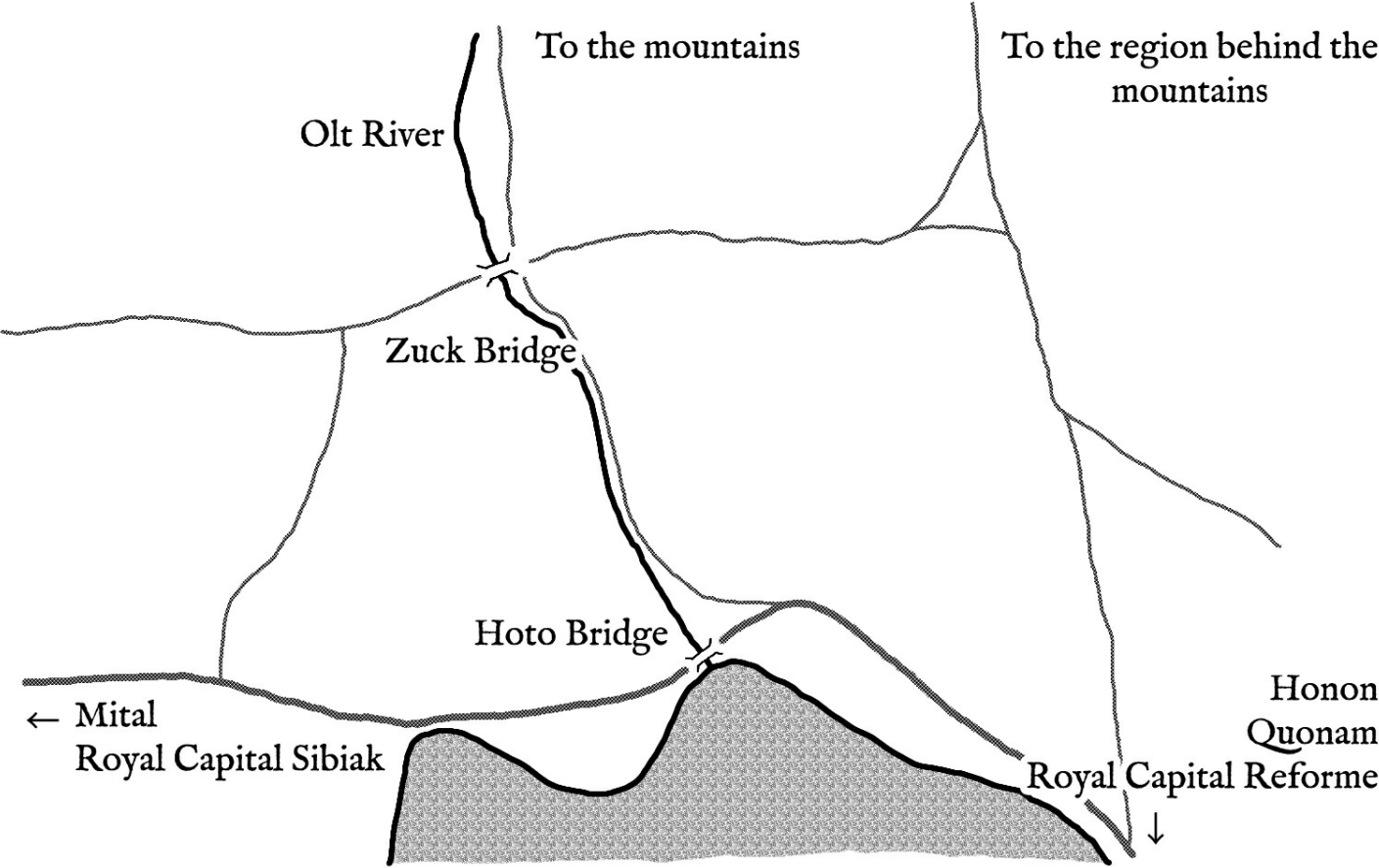
The current models only had a few cannons with low accuracy, which left much room for improvement, but Ange saw great promise in these new warships.

“I see. You mean the bridge that lies near the river’s mouth?” Epitaph asked.

“Indeed—that’s the largest bridge. It should be within reach of a ship traveling upstream. Then there’s another smaller bridge even further upstream, so the enemy will be forced to head for that instead. If we can destroy the first bridge fast enough, we’ll buy ourselves some time.”

“Astounding. I’ll execute your plan immediately.”

For all his flaws, Epitaph actually listened to people and was willing to accept ideas besides his own. Ange considered this one of his few redeeming features.



II

While the party was in the middle of a scheduled extended rest, I was sitting on a chair in a small clearing.

An extended rest meant that we'd stop for about an hour, unlike our short ones where we'd only pause long enough for people to give their legs a break. This was primarily used as a time for people to eat. At that moment, though, the people had finished their meal and were resting.

On the opposite side of a small grove, I could hear the flow of the river that marked the border between the two kingdoms. It sounded as though the fast-moving water was washing over the large rocks that lay on its bed. Unlike the large river that flowed through Sibiak, I found the sounds it made far from relaxing.

Still, it meant our long trip was coming to an end. Looking back, it really *had* been a long journey. However, I was about to learn that our ordeal was far from over.

A subordinate appeared with an eagle in tow. He bowed his head solemnly, and the tone of his voice matched his posture as he delivered the devastating news.

"What? Say that again," I said the instant he finished speaking.

"Yes, Sir. According to scouts from the Rube family, a force of one thousand—bearing the Papal State flag—has landed on this road."

It felt like my calm heart was gripped by an icy hand. My blood pressure rose, and my heartbeat quickened.

"Okay. Did they tell us anything more?"

"You may destroy the Zuck Bridge. They said to prioritize your own safety."

It would take time and money to reconstruct a bridge. They wouldn't have given us permission to destroy it if they doubted the information at all. After all, destroying it over a miscommunication would be too great a cost to pay. That meant it couldn't have been a single sighting—they must've gotten the same

report of an enemy landing from several of their scouts.

And when they said “your” safety, there was an implicit order of priority: it was Carol, Tellur, and then chieftain families’ sons—Liao and me—in that order.

“Did you hear it from Lord Kien directly?”

“Yes. Lord Kien told me to return immediately and inform my captain.”

I was speaking to Mira—the only one of our remaining kingeagle riders who was born to a family that served the Rubes directly. This relationship meant that he was in charge of our communication with the Rube family as the end of our journey drew near. Given his lineage, it wasn’t surprising to hear that he’d met with Kien directly.

“And what’s the status of Hoto Bridge?”

Hoto Bridge was much further downstream, close to the mouth of the river. It’d been partially destroyed by a gunship three days ago, just before we’d reached it.

The ship’s wild aim had almost prevented it from hitting the bridge at all, but a lucky shot had destroyed one of the arches, causing a section almost ten-meters long to collapse. Repairs would already be underway, but everyone who’d decided to use the upstream bridge rather than wait had since started following me along the uphill road.

When I’d heard that the gunship had dropped its anchor and remained by the coast, I’d thought it had just been an attempt to unnerve us, but now it seemed it may have been part of the landing operation.

But why would they choose now to land by ship? Are they after us...?

I had no way to know. A landing operation that made use of ships wasn’t something I’d considered until now.

If I assumed the enemy had known our plans from the start and were indeed targeting us, their behavior made no sense. The enemy had no reason to pursue us when we were so close to the border. If they knew so much about us, they should’ve begun their pursuit much sooner. I couldn’t understand why the gunship had arrived so far ahead of the landing operation either. If they’d

landed while the gunship had attacked, we wouldn't have had time to get near the border. The enemy would've been safe—far away from Rube Province, but close to the water's edge, where they could've charged us without losing their ability to withdraw easily.

What was the advantage in waiting until now to land their ships? Why'd they wait until we were on the verge of escaping?

"Um, Sir Yuri?"

"Oh... Please go on."

"Several large trees were felled and carried to Hoto Bridge to create temporary crossing points. Right now, everything other than large wagons can still get across."

Only a portion of the bridge had been destroyed. A few logs that were over ten meters long could be used to make basic repairs. A temporary fix was the right idea.

"I don't suppose any Rube soldiers are headed here?"

"I don't believe so. The bridge was destroyed, after all."

So they already returned to Shiyalta and now can't get back here? After pushing refugees aside to make way for themselves, they can't cross again so easily. What a mess.

"Go back to Lord Kien and tell him to help us somehow. If his soldiers head further downstream, they should be able to swim across."

"But Sir..."

"I know they won't get here before the enemy catches up to us, but the enemy's probably going to massacre any civilians they can't take with them. Is Lord Kien going to just stand by and watch while it happens under his nose? What'll people say about the Rube family?"

That left Mira looking troubled. "Um..."

"Tell that to Lord Kien only. Got that? To Lord Kien."

"Understood."

“Now go.”

Mira went running back to his eagle.

It was June 29th. We expected to reach Zuck Bridge the next day, though given the situation was what it was, there'd be over ten thousand refugees waiting to cross there already. There'd also be others who'd given up on Hoto Bridge and started heading upstream faster than we could travel, which would put us at the back of the line.

Enemy soldiers were likely to charge at us while we were stuck waiting. We could put the civilians between the enemy and ourselves easily enough, making them human shields, but no one would forgive us for doing that.

I spent ten seconds or so pondering the problem before realizing that there was no time for careful deliberation. I threw away the crutch I was holding and walked toward my plainrunner. I'd kept the crutch with me at all times since I'd left Reforme, but I had no time for it now.

“Liao,” I called out from my plainrunner.

Liao was taking an extended rest, just like I had. He turned to look at me when I called him.

“Hey, Yuri,” he said cheerfully. He'd clearly loosened up a little as the tiring expedition was coming to an end.

Giaume was beside him, and they appeared to be working out what supplies we had left over.

I hooked my plainrunner's reins over a protruding part of a parked wagon and pointed toward the grove.

“Let's talk over there for a moment,” I said to Liao. I paused and wondered whether I should talk to Giaume too since he was also there. “Giaume, can you keep secrets?”

“I think that's for you to decide,” he replied.

That was irritating.

“I don't have time for arguments right now,” I snapped. It was clear from

Giaume's face that the anger in my voice had had an effect on him. "Forget it. Just come with us. Don't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you."

If he let the secret out, I'd deal with it when it happened.

We walked deep into the trees. Once we'd gone far enough that we knew no one could hear, the three of us faced one another. I found a dry tree trunk that was the perfect size to lean my back against.

"I'll give you the gist. The Papal State landed a force of a thousand soldiers near the river mouth. They're ignoring Hoto Bridge and heading for us."

Liao's eyes went wide in response, and Giaume gulped.

"We need to plan an escape for Carol and the little princess. Getting Carol out isn't going to be difficult—she just has to borrow someone's eagle and fly over the river."

The flow here was too strong for anyone on foot to swim across, but the river was narrow enough to fly over. Carol's leg had mostly healed too, so there was nothing stopping her from riding an eagle. She'd be safe traveling the short distance.

"The problem is the wagon with the princess that Dolla's guarding. We should send it ahead right now," I continued.

This was our only option since Tellur couldn't ride an eagle.

"We'll send a few squads ahead to manage the refugees and ensure they keep crossing efficiently twenty-four hours a day. Have some of our most capable people handle that. If any civilians are stupid enough to get in the way and refuse to cooperate, they can be executed on the spot." The moment I said it, I realized how badly it could go if the soldiers killed a civilian. The idea of the bloodshed triggering a riot scared me. I clarified, "But don't run them through with a spear. Throw them into the river. I'll take responsibility."

That way, there wouldn't be any blood or a body. It would have the right psychological impact on the others watching.

"Are they after us?" Liao asked.

By "they," he obviously meant the enemy force.

“I don’t know. Well...chances are they’re after our two princesses. If they were just slavers, they would’ve targeted Hoto Bridge.”

“That’s true,” Liao agreed.

There was also the possibility that the destruction of Hoto Bridge was all part of a larger plan that required soldiers to march north, but it seemed more likely that they were after Carol and Tellur.

“They won’t take slaves this far into our territory—they wouldn’t be able to transport them home. That means they’ll be massacring civilians on the way here.”

Giaume hadn’t been asked, but he chimed in anyway. “I agree, especially since it’s the Papal State we’re dealing with.”

In fact, the enemy had a history of doing just that whenever it wasn’t possible to take Shanti people away as slaves. A thousand soldiers wouldn’t have any trouble slaughtering a few thousand people. If each soldier killed three people, that would be three thousand victims—not a million casualties, sure, but still a significant number.

Upstream, there was a mass of tens of thousands of refugees near the bridge, waiting to get across. The thousand civilians I was escorting were about to join the end of the line too. There’d be no shortage of people for the enemy to kill.

“While they’re getting Tellur across, let’s find former woodcutters who’re carrying axes and conscript them as soldiers. We can tempt them with money if they’re reluctant. We need as many as we can get.”

Our policy of making people abandon their belongings when they left Reforme meant that everyone had only been allowed to carry one tool that they needed to make a living. Obviously, large ones like looms hadn’t been allowed, but many were carrying things like carving knives, sewing kits, and sculpting chisels. There hadn’t been many woodcutters living in the city, but those that did would have an axe with them.

“Do you see what I’m planning?” I asked.

“You’ll have them stay behind us and cut down trees to block the road, right?” Liao replied.

I wasn't sure if he'd be able to guess that much, but someone with that level of insight was exactly what I needed.

"That's right. We leave the treetops lying in the road so that they hinder the enemy."

"Got it. Let's do it."

"We also need to keep this information from the refugees. If it spreads, there's bound to be panic."

"You're right. I'll bear it in mind," Liao agreed.

"That's our discussion over. We need to get started quickly."

"Are you going to go look for Myalo?" Liao asked.

"No, I'll let you explain everything to her. I'm going to borrow an eagle to get a look at the enemy. Let's get started; we're racing against time."

Liao and Giaume both briefly bowed their heads to me, then ran off.



I hadn't ridden an eagle since the crash. The feeling of the wind against my face as I moved freely through the air brought back so many memories.

I followed the riverside road heading downstream, like a fish heading toward the sea, watching the river gradually widen and the cliffs on either side become smaller. The trees didn't change much along the way because the difference in height wasn't enough to cause a sudden shift in the plant life.

As I flew low, I carefully looked down and saw something dark covering the road in the distance. For a short while, I headed away from the road and gained altitude. If I flew high enough, I'd be beyond the limits of human depth perception, making me look like a small bird to anyone on the ground. Only someone highly familiar with eagles could identify the bird while I flew this high.

After I'd gained enough height, I got into a position where I could observe the ground with the sun at my back. I gradually moved lower until the figures came into view.

As expected, a group—composed of a serious army unit that included horse-drawn wagons—was moving along part of the road we'd recently passed. There were no ports nearby where a large ship could dock, but they must've anchored their ships somewhere to get all these horses and wagons here.

These guys never quit, do they?

Only about a tenth of the soldiers were on horseback, while the others were moving at a jog. That kept the whole group marching at the pace of a slightly hurried wagon, despite many soldiers being on foot.

Needless to say, they wouldn't be able to keep up that grueling pace for long. I couldn't see what they were carrying from this distance, but they were no doubt running with their gear. It wasn't an issue of how well trained the soldiers were. Running over a long distance was something that rarely happened outside training. These soldiers clearly weren't behaving normally, though.

Normally I'd wonder whether they might be trying to get behind an opponent or mount a raid on Shiyalta in preparation for a future war, but in either of those cases, there'd be no point in this forced march—they wouldn't be able to keep it up much longer.

Besides, even though the Rube family had been defeated in Kilhina, there'd still be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of soldiers within their province. No matter how foolish the enemy, they'd know that far more than a few hundred soldiers awaited them in Rube Province. And even if they *did* believe that an attack on Rube Province was likely to succeed, I couldn't understand why they'd charge blindly ahead when there was a risk of a larger force arriving to attack them from behind.

It was too reckless. The enemy was going to extremes. Information must've been leaked to them. This all had to be because of Carol and Tellur—there was no other explanation. I still couldn't understand why they'd been so slow to act, but it was possible they'd swiftly captured Reforme before giving chase.

No matter how much they valued our princesses, though, they were going too far. There had to be something more to explain their erratic behavior. Perhaps delusion drove them, or perhaps it was just pure greed. I couldn't tell. But, in any case, I had to do what I could.

I turned my eagle around and began climbing again. As I approached the rear of the army, the eagle reacted to my instructions poorly. I'd never flown this bird before, and I didn't even know its name.

The wagons were in the center of the long procession. They were moving pretty fast, so I wasn't sure whether I'd hit them.

While keeping my upper body low against the eagle, I took out my lighter and gripped the fuse of a firebomb.

The leather glove I used to shield the lighter began to singe while I was lighting the fuse. Once the oilcloth that extended from the earthen pot caught fire, I had the eagle plummet straight down.

I kept myself aligned with the road as I continued the descent.

I pulled up much sooner than I had while attempting the same thing with Stardust, untying the string holding the firebombs in place as I did so. While pulling the reins to instruct the eagle to ascend, I leaned to the side and looked down. There was a red trail of fire coming from the cluster of four firebombs. They curved through the air, then landed right where the wagons had been. I watched as the flames erupted and began to spread.

I hope that actually hit.

If I took their food and water away, it would halt their march. They couldn't easily descend the cliff to fetch drinking water from the river, and they'd grow too hungry to fight. In fact, just one day without food would be too much for them, since they'd spent the day running.

Sadly, it was wishful thinking to expect that I could destroy every one of their wagons this way.



By the time I'd returned, the sun was already setting.

As I circled in the air, I realized someone had been smart enough to prepare for my return. Obstacles had been cleared off a clear patch of ground to create a landing area for me.

Upon my descent onto the spot, with the eagle beating its wings to create air

resistance, Myalo came running over. She would've known that I'd land right here, so she must've instructed some of the others to clear the area.

I took off my harness and climbed down from the eagle. I looked around and spotted Guy, a fellow eagle rider. I handed him the reins for the bird I'd borrowed.

"Sorry. Thanks for helping me out."

"No, it's an honor."

He's way too humble.

"It's a fine eagle you've got. It was easy to ride."

"Thank you, Sir."

As Guy bowed his head, I turned away and walked toward Myalo.

"Myalo."

"As per your orders, we've finished moving for today, and everyone is preparing to start cooking."

So no holdups.

"I want to talk with our leaders. Can you get everyone together?"

"Already have."

They've already gathered? Should've known Myalo would have it covered.

I couldn't imagine how much harder things would've been if she hadn't been here. Whatever praise I gave her, it wouldn't be enough.

"Nice work. Let's go."

"Yes, Sir."

But there was no time for long-winded praise. We were still working against the clock.

"Looks like everyone's here," I said.

It was little more than a few sheets among the trees, but for now, this was our camp. Carol and Liao were already there waiting. They'd built a small

bonfire, and it was surrounded by four simple folding chairs.

Liao was sitting in sullen silence. Likewise, Carol's temper was clear from her knitted brow. The mood felt off somehow, like they were ready to erupt into an argument.

"How'd it go?" Carol asked. She must've already heard about our situation.

"It looks like we can't run."

Carol scowled with frustration.

I sat down on a folding chair, and Myalo sat right next to me.

"It looks like they're elite soldiers. They were all running uphill toward us. They'll make contact...tomorrow morning or around noon. Maybe we'll have until 2 or 3 p.m. if we're really lucky."

There was no way to predict the exact time.

I'd seen several points along the way where the road had been blocked by trees, as I'd instructed Liao to do. Since main roads like this were well suited to gathering lumber, though, the small trees there didn't form much of an impediment. None of the trees were over a hundred years old—any that old and large had been cut down and carried away long ago—so a few dozen soldiers could easily push the obstacles out of the way.

"I'd like to make something clear," Liao said. "I won't die here on this mission."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard Liao say something like this.

Carol was the one to reply, anger clear on her face. "So you'll push civilians aside to get across the bridge, then sit on the other side wringing your hands while they're massacred? You must be *some* knight if you can do that and still call yourself a chieftain."

"I've explained this to you already—I've got other responsibilities to consider. My life belongs to Rube Province. I can't give it up here. The same goes for you, for that matter."

The tense atmosphere must've come about from these two arguing.

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Stop,” I cut Carol off. “What you’re saying’s true, Liao, but would you really be happy with the situation Carol just described?”

“I’m not saying I’d be happy. I’m saying I can’t lay down my life,” Liao retorted. Then, he fell silent, his dissatisfaction clear on his face.

“It’d be a huge mental blow to our soldiers, and our reputations would hit rock bottom,” I warned him.

Military considerations aside, civilians would grow to hate soldiers who wouldn’t do anything to defend them. Our excuse would be that we had no chance of winning, and that we’d never prepared to fight, but that wouldn’t justify running while the slaughtered civilians served as our shield. Our cowardice would never be forgotten.

“Besides, I took on the task of escorting these people, so now it’s our unit’s job to protect them,” I added.

We were only responsible for one thousand civilians, but they’d be at the back of the line of many more people. That meant, in effect, that I had to worry about all of them. Even if we ignored the ethical problems, it’d be almost impossible for our one thousand to push past the ten thousand ahead.

“Then you plan on fighting, Yuri? What can we do against a thousand elite soldiers? It’ll be like trying to block a spear with paper.”

It was an apt analogy.

His alternative was to abandon the civilians and run, because if we were as weak as paper, it was better not to try. He also knew that this paper had the potential to grow into something stronger someday. It was foolish to waste that potential right here. His thinking was logical, but it was also naive. Liao should’ve been smart enough to know how much it would damage our futures if we turned a blind eye to the massacre.

Retreating from a hopeless fight was a fine way to think when there wasn’t anything worthy on the line, but these were human lives at stake. We’d have to abandon the civilians before us, then watch them be slaughtered as we destroyed the bridge. How would our soldiers go back to an ordinary life after

that? We could drink to forget our sorrows, but that wouldn't fix much.

What's more, an army that lost the support of its civilians was weak. When Liao would finally rule his province, his past deeds would make him unpopular, and the Rube family's power would wane.

The only reason Liao could settle for such a simple plan was because the responsibility ultimately wasn't his. It wasn't up to Liao whether we abandoned the civilians, and therefore he wouldn't be the one responsible when it happened.

I briefly summarized my thoughts. "If a spear can easily tear through paper, then let's make sure the paper avoids the thrust."

"What?"

"Wait." I raised a hand to silence Liao. "Myalo."

"Yes?"

"If the civilians continue crossing the bridge smoothly, how long will it take until we're all across?"

"If they follow our guidance as well as they have up until now, then roughly speaking...tomorrow evening. Getting across by noon is more or less impossible."

If she'd said that the crossing would continue late into the night, I'd have accepted that it was hopeless, but holding out until evening could be possible.

"So if we continue on as we are, then we have to buy ourselves about half a day of time to make a safe crossing."

"That's right. I think everyone will make it if we delay the enemy by half a day, though we also need to consider how we're going to destroy the bridge."

"I think we can handle all that."

But whatever we did, this was going to be risky.

"Then what's your plan?" Liao's question was almost a demand for answers. "You're not seriously planning to fight them, are you?"

"Fighting isn't the only option."

“But the enemy’s headed right here. How can we avoid fighting? And if we’re not fighting, why shouldn’t we get across first anyway?”

If our plan was to remain here until the enemy arrived only to push the civilians aside and run without fighting, then why not get across the river in advance? Since we were armed, pushing civilians aside to get across the bridge wouldn’t be difficult. That was what Liao wanted to ask.

“No, we need soldiers here. The enemy won’t feel threatened otherwise.”

“Threatened...?” Liao looked doubtful.

“I can’t turn paper into an iron plate, but I can make sure a spear never hits it. A spear’s only as accurate as its wielder, after all. Let me explain.”

III

That night, Tellur Toni Shaltl was in Kilhina.

The bridge nearby was packed with people who were continuing to cross, even though it was the middle of the night. There was yelling in the distance as unfamiliar soldiers hurried the crowd toward the bridge in the darkness, without letting them know the situation.

Tellur had crossed the bridge once already. The first time she’d set out on the strange structure—part beautiful stone, part crudely constructed wood—she had the whole bridge to herself as she’d ridden a carriage into Shiyalta. The incident had no doubt drawn the ire of others waiting to cross. But soon after the sun had begun to set, a messenger on an eagle had arrived, and she’d been quickly put onto a horse and sent back. Although she’d taken the stone segment during her first crossing, it was the wooden part of the bridge that had been closed off for her return trip. She’d watched the crowd of people on the stone half as she crossed back into Kilhina.

That was when she’d been separated from her carer, Hinami Weerts. She’d been given another wagon with a canopy to serve as her bed at night, but she didn’t feel like sleeping.

Tellur couldn’t understand any of it. She was wrapped in a blanket watching the flame inside a lantern. Her arrangements must have been hastily prepared

for her, because the blanket was a worn-out old thing, and the bed was nothing more than linen over a pile of straw. It was the first time in her life she'd ever been asked to sleep in a bed so crude.

In spite of all that, she *had* attempted to sleep, but it had eluded her. In the end, she sat back up and watched the flame since she had nothing else to do. Many negative thoughts ran through her head that night as she mulled things over, though that wasn't anything new.

She'd spent quite some time idly thinking before the canopy to the rear of the wagon slowly opened.

The face that appeared was one she'd grown used to seeing over the past ten days or so. It belonged to Dolla Godwin. His group was apparently in charge of guarding Tellur; they stood guard around the wagon without sleeping. When Tellur had returned to the Kilhina side of the bridge, it was Dolla who'd led her horse by its reins.

"Do you...want something?" Tellur asked in a vanishingly quiet voice.

"No. Just wondering if you were asleep."

Dolla wasn't incapable of expressing himself, but he clearly lacked the sort of eloquence that people normally displayed while attending the royal court.

"I can't sleep."

"I see. Can I come in?"

"Go ahead." Tellur gave him permission to enter the canopy. There were things she wanted to ask him.

Dolla undid the laces of his boots, placed them outside, and slowly climbed into the wagon. Even while stooping forward, he was so big that his head almost touched the canopy ceiling. He must have weighed several times as much as Tellur.

For someone who boasted of his skills at the Knight Academy, this man was surprisingly mild-mannered. In fact, during their ten days together, he'd spent much of his time sitting in quiet contemplation. He sat down carefully on a wooden crate near the wagon's entrance.

“Um... What are your people going to do with me?” Tellur asked in a feeble voice.

She hadn’t been informed of anything since they’d all set out, but yesterday she’d sensed something had caused a stir. There was no need to yell at people and hurry them across the bridge otherwise. There also had to have been some meaning behind the decision to make Tellur cross back to Kilhina. If she’d been summoned back, they must have needed her for something.

“Well... I haven’t been told anything,” Dolla replied.

Tellur didn’t think he was lying to her—he wasn’t cunning enough to lie convincingly. It was the very reason she’d wanted to talk to him, but it seemed she wouldn’t learn anything from him anyway.

“I see.”

“Um... Things aren’t too bad, so you’ll be fine. No need to worry.”

Dolla’s words were merely baseless attempts at reassurance. Tellur could guess that much.

“Does Yuri—Lord Yuri—plan to hand me over?”

That was what worried Tellur the most. She didn’t understand the complexities of the situation, but the most likely explanation she’d been brought back to this side would be for the sake of a trade—in other words, to sell her to the Kulati. In exchange, the enemy might stop chasing the others.

“Huh? Um, you think Yuri might sell you?”

“Yes.”

“Pah. Ha ha,” Dolla laughed to himself. It was clear from his face that he found this amusing. He rejected the idea like it was a tasteless joke. “There’s no chance of that. He’s not that kind of guy.”

It was the first time Tellur had seen Dolla laugh. She asked, “How can you be sure?”

“How...? It’s just my own opinion.”

Just his opinion? In other words, he didn’t have any sound logic to support

what he was saying.

Dolla's smile had already faded.

"Do you know him well?" she asked.

"Who? Yuri?"

"Yes."

"We've shared a room at the Knight Academy for eight years...but no, not really."

That was news to Tellur.

"You don't know him despite spending eight years together?"

"Well, I know him better than most people, but... I'm just too dumb to figure him out. I wouldn't say I understand him."

Tellur wasn't sure what to make of that. *Does he mean it's hard for anyone to understand Yuri?* "Then how can you be sure that he won't sell me?"

"Umm, well... Because he's tough. He always figures something out. Anyhow, you really don't need to worry about anyone selling you."

It wasn't much of an answer, but somehow he sounded sure of it. Even if he didn't understand Yuri, he might have known enough about his nature to be sure. Although he wasn't ridiculing Tellur's fears, he clearly thought they were ridiculous.

Tellur tried bluntly rejecting Dolla's reassurances. "I don't have any faith in him."

"You don't?"

"I don't know what he's thinking, and I just feel that something's not right about him."

That was the impression she'd had of Yuri ever since they'd first met. He was handsome and well-mannered enough to talk to a queen like an equal despite his young age, but despite that—or perhaps *because* of that—something about him just didn't seem right.

It was the same feeling of fear she got when peering into a deep ravine. She

felt she might be carried off to some distant land just by talking to him.

Dolla didn't seem to care. "Well, no one trusts anyone they've known for just a few days. I don't see the problem."

"But if I don't trust him, I'll be too anxious to sleep..." Tellur spoke with the same tone she used on her servants when she wanted comfort.

"It's okay if you can't sleep. We're not going to make you walk later."

"That's not the problem..."

Dolla hadn't understood her. Perhaps when she became a Kilhinan girl living in Shiyalta, no one would ever understand her again.

"Well, if anyone *does* try to sell you, I'll come to your rescue."

"Oh...?"

Does he mean it?

"If it doesn't seem fair to me, I'll run off with you before they can give you to the enemy. If it does seem fair, then...well, maybe I'll just watch over the trade, but I'll still come to save you afterward."

In contrast to his bold words, Dolla seemed sluggish. He didn't sound full of ambition or motivated by greed. He was just sitting on a wooden box speaking into the darkness, making promises in an attempt to put her mind at ease.

"Even though...you might die trying it?"

"Yes. Do you feel better?"

"No. Why would you do so much for me?" she asked.

Dolla's response had only made Tellur feel confused. She didn't want to die, and she assumed he felt the same way. So why did he act like he wouldn't mind dying for Tellur's sake?

"I shouldn't say this, but I recently lost my reason to live."

"Ahhh..." Tellur didn't understand at all.

"Well, if Yuri were to sell you—I don't think he would, but if he *did*—I'd do something about it. If he'd do something like that, I wouldn't want to follow his

orders anyway. It won't happen, though."

"Really?"

His words sounded like something a person might promise their lover. But somehow, she felt she could rely on Dolla if anything happened.

"Oh, am I making you uncomfortable? Sorry, I'll—"

"No, please. I appreciate your offer." Tellur bowed her head without getting up.

"In exchange... No, I mean, uh, could I sleep here a while? Just until my shift starts in three hours or so. It'll mean extra security for you, so..."

"I don't mind at all."

"All right. Then please go to sleep, Your Highness."

Dolla must have been quite tired, because he rested his elbow on his knee and let his head hang low. He gradually relaxed, and just a minute later, appeared to be asleep.



Tellur watched him for a while before quietly climbing into her crude bed and wrapping herself in the slightly musty blanket. Her consciousness faded with unexpected ease, and soon she was asleep too.

IV

Delaro Fieser belonged to the first cavalry battalion of the third division of the Volunteer Knight Order, where he commanded a troop of forty knights.

Under the long-standing regulations of the Volunteer Knight Order, cavalymen were arranged into squads of eight, which themselves were combined into groups of five to create troops of forty soldiers each. Foot soldiers, meanwhile, were arranged in squads of ten, and ten of those were combined to create a platoon.

The practice of assembling cavalry squads from eight knights was a holdover from the days when knightdom equated to nobility, though the exact reason for doing so had been long forgotten. It was somehow related to the number four—the number of characters in a tetragrammaton—but it was a mystery why it would then be doubled to eight. At any rate, some believed that the practice held special significance.

It was one such troop of forty knights that Delaro had under his command. Higher worth was placed on a mounted knight than a foot soldier, making his position one of considerable responsibility.

But at that moment, Delaro was leading a small group of just seven mounted knights—eight, if he counted himself—as he rode through the lands of the far north.

The reason he was accompanied by only a few knights, despite being the head of a group of forty, wasn't because the others had all died or surrendered. His unit had been rearranged into something much smaller for the sake of this strange landing operation. He'd therefore left the other thirty-two members of his troop at the front line.

Having been the captain of forty men for over ten years now, he was reluctant to see his carefully crafted unit broken up, but he hadn't been able to

refuse—the order had come from the war minister himself.

At that moment, Delaro had detached from the landing force to scout the region for the enemy.

Their horses traveled at a trot, but never sped up beyond that. They'd been ordered to conduct their scouting as quickly as possible, but this was as fast as they could move. Since their mission was taking place in enemy territory, they had a limited number of horses and barely enough food for them all. To make matters worse, they were constantly going uphill. Although it wasn't particularly steep, it was far more tiring to traverse than level ground. Their horses were already tired, so going any faster would leave their horses exhausted.

Delaro constantly monitored his horse's condition while remaining wary and watchful of his surroundings. It was important for a scout to keep their eyes and ears open at all times—he could never let his guard down. At the same time, the scenery that surrounded Delaro stirred such feelings within him that he couldn't help but recite poetry to himself.

The transformation from a land frozen by the harsh winters and devoid of life, to a land covered by budding leaves in the early summer, made him think of the early days of purity—the time when life first arose from the primordial earth. The air was clear, so visibility was good enough to see for long distances. Perhaps that was what made the poignant image of life's creation all the stronger.

The forests here were full of flora that were completely different from those back home. As his horse passed by some, he felt like he was losing himself in another world.

And the air was good too—the cold of the night had more or less cleared now that it was approaching noon. Despite being in the middle of enemy territory, Delaro felt exhilarated. But as he inhaled that air, he realized that it carried a faint odor. There was a smell of smoke—something was burning.

"Anyone else smell smoke?" Delaro asked.

"I can."

"A little."

If his subordinates noticed it too, then he knew he wasn't imagining things.

"Refugees must've made a nest somewhere around here," one of his senior subordinates suggested.

Indeed, it was likely to be refugees still preparing to set out, or a campfire they'd made but forgotten to extinguish. They could even be cooking their lunch.

"Stay alert," Delaro ordered his subordinates as he pulled on the reins to slow his horse a little.

Delaro hadn't made a career of leading reconnaissance missions, but he knew how to handle them. During this sort of scouting especially, it was beneficial to spot the enemy first while avoiding their notice. Sometimes it was necessary to engage, however.

While being drawn into combat was undesirable, such encounters were often unavoidable given the terrain—that was, when moving on a road beside a forest rather than a wide open field with good visibility.

The biggest danger that needed to be avoided was a situation where the enemy predicted that scouts would come. An ambush, in other words. If scouts had their retreat completely cut off by the enemy, they'd become like beasts caught in a hunter's trap, ready to be eliminated with ease. Delaro had known several units that had never returned after they'd run into such an ambush.

"Yes, Sir!" his subordinates replied in unison.

The scouts slowed their pace after that, but they wouldn't have to go far before they reached the source of the smell.

The road was generally straight as it ran alongside the cliff at the edge of the river, but up ahead, the cliffside curved inwards. Naturally, the road didn't just keep going over the cliff—there was a V-shaped section of road that turned away from the river. The turn in the road meant that their view to the right was blocked by the trees, and a part of the path ahead was completely obscured.

But that wasn't the main focus of Delaro's attention.

Where the road turned, there was a clear view from the cliff that afforded

some impressive scenery. There was also a viewing platform, complete with a railing to ensure no one fell off the edge, where people could take it all in. A river ran through the rocky valley, and in the distance was a towering mountain range, shrouded by mist.

Naturally, the most strategically important point along this valley was the bridge up ahead that spanned the river. This was probably the upstream bridge that had been discussed in depth during the strategy meeting.

It was burning.

Smoke billowed from the bridge as flames engulfed it. Light gray clouds rose from the fire to be carried off toward the east by the wind. They must have caught the smell from downstream just for a moment due to a change in wind direction.

As Delaro witnessed this shocking sight blighting the picturesque scenery, he wondered, *If they've burned the bridge, does that mean there's no one left on this side?*

When an enemy arrived, bridges were destroyed—it was a standard practice used on battlefields everywhere through all of history. It was often quicker to burn a dry wooden bridge than to cut it down with axes.

But bridges weren't destroyed until the enemy got there. In this case, the enemy was still some way off. More accurately, Delaro's scouts were only *just* making first contact.

If they've set fire to it already...

There were many heartless commanders who considered civilians worthless, but surely none so cowardly that they'd set fire to a bridge and render it impassable before any threat had even arrived.

The most basic common sense said that it was better to wait until the enemy attacked. In other words, to wait for the threat to draw near. Everyone must have crossed already, which meant that Delaro wouldn't find anyone close to the bridge. The bridge had been burned because it no longer served any purpose—that was the most rational explanation.

As Delaro reached this conclusion, he absentmindedly quickened his horse.

“Enemy to the right!” one of his subordinates yelled.

Delaro had been so distracted by the burning bridge and his speculations that, without realizing it, he’d advanced beyond the corner and onto the V-shaped section of road.

As more of the road came into view, Delaro hastily looked ahead and noticed that a simple wall—constructed from wood—had been erected about twenty meters away. There was a small force of about thirty soldiers or so waiting there. They were long-eareds, no older than boys, looking in Delaro’s direction and pointing their spears at him.

It looked like a band of bandits with some half-decent leadership had decided to try their hand at building their own defensive walls, but nothing more than that. They hadn’t even fired a single arrow, let alone a gun. It was unlikely that they’d come spilling out of their position to attack.

Since the risk was low, Delaro decided to remain there, riding in circles while he examined their position. His circular motion would make him difficult to hit. He wasn’t going to assume that they didn’t have any arrows simply because they hadn’t fired any yet. Still, the lack of action wasn’t a surprise to him—even though the enemy had a clear shot, they were often passive like this. Arrows were surprisingly costly and tended to run out when needed. This small force might not have even possessed a hundred to spare.

Since the enemy knew the scouts would soon leave, there was no need to drive them off with arrows. If he looked at it that way, there was nothing unusual about their unwillingness to fire any.

What *was* strange, however, was that the voice giving orders to the small force sounded like that of a woman.

“That’s a woman’s voice... And she’s...”

Delaro narrowed his eyes. There was a blonde woman—she made no attempt to hide her hair—sitting on one of their flightless birds. She gave out orders in a loud, bold voice. Delaro could hear a little of it, but of course, he couldn’t understand what her words meant.

“Hey, Dieche,” Delaro said to the youngster with the best eyesight of anyone

in the group. “Does she look odd to you?”

“She has blonde hair... And there’s another just like her. Two blonde girls.”

Since they were only twenty meters away, Delaro could see them too. The other girl was sitting on a horse, slouching forward and looking timid.

“That’s crazy,” another of the scouts said.

He was right. It was hard to believe that both blonde girls were right here.

In a city market, Delaro had seen a horn said to belong to a unicorn, but he’d never seen a blonde long-eared. They were like creatures of legend, and yet *two* had appeared before him.

The enemy still hadn’t emerged to attack. They looked ready to charge out at any moment, but as long as they remained passive, it seemed safe to examine them through a telescope. From this distance, a telescope would reveal all the fine details of their faces.

“What are we going to do now?” one of his subordinates asked excitedly. “Should we charge them?”

If they captured a blonde princess, the renown they’d achieve would be valuable beyond measure. Delaro couldn’t help but consider it for a moment.

“No... Our mission was to scout. Besides, there’s a lot of them. Things could take an unexpected turn.”

“Yes, Sir,” the subordinate replied.

“Graah!”

On hearing this strange cry, Delaro turned to see that Dieche—who was still on his horse and positioned close to the trees—had been impaled by some object. It was the shaft of a long spear.

The bearer of the spear was smeared with the wet, rotten remains of fallen leaves. He’d emerged from the ground beside them before driving his spear through Dieche. The spear bearer had no other weapons or armor, and he was wet with the moisture from the ground. He’d lain in the mud, waiting in ambush.

“***!” The spear-bearer yelled an incomprehensible order, then others camouflaged in the same way all appeared at once and charged with their spears.

“Retreat!” Delaro yelled as he turned his horse around.

Damn. It's all going to shit.

He gritted his teeth as he looked at the way ahead.

There was a turn in the road. Since it was downhill, he knew he could charge past everyone by riding at full speed. But the turn, though it wasn't tight, would make it difficult to build up speed. It could be the difference between life and death.

He heard a cry from the veteran soldier beside him. “Ugh!”

He glanced over as he guided his horse. A spear protruded from a gap in the scout's armor. Having been hardened through many battles, the scout knew to grab the spear immediately. This would stop it from being twisted and widening his wound, or from being pulled out and increasing his blood loss.

“Bastards!”

The scout swiftly drew his saber and cut through the long shaft of the spear in his hands. Unfortunately, the few seconds he'd spent on this act cost him his life. More spears approached him from outside of his sword's reach, skewering his body in multiple places.

Delaro took his eyes off the horrific scene and bid his horse to accelerate as he rode around the corner. Beyond the turn, he knew he'd find more enemies lying in wait within the decaying leaves. They'd be ready to impale him on their spears.

“Retreat! Retreat!” Delaro yelled as he charged between more spears thrust his way.

When he finally made it in the clear, he simply chalked it up to good luck. Then, without ever looking back, he galloped off the way he'd come.



“That ends my report,” Delaro concluded.

“Hm...” Epitaph’s expression was uncharacteristically serious as he sat deep in his chair, thinking.

Likewise, Ange’s mind was full of racing thoughts.

The bridge was down, and both princesses were on the front line. After searching everywhere, they’d finally found the ones they were looking for.

The enemy had known that the scouts posed little threat. They’d been confident enough to let the princesses stand close to the fighting—according to the report, at least.

But something didn’t feel right.

Most likely, the enemy had let themselves be seen as a means of drawing in the scouts. When Delaro got too close, it resulted in the loss of six members of his unit. Delaro and the remaining soldier’s return meant the reconnaissance mission had been an overall success, but that didn’t change the fact that they’d gone too far and gotten caught in an ambush.

The blonde princesses were bait to draw them into the ambush. That made sense, but there had to be more to it.

Isn’t protecting those princesses the enemy’s top priority? But they destroyed the bridge with the princesses on this side. Why would they do that?

Ange didn’t understand it. There had to be a reason, but none of the explanations she came up with could adequately explain everything.

“Perhaps the princesses are on the front lines to inspire some courage in their weak soldiers,” Epitaph suggested.

It was an overly simplistic explanation, but it did at least fit with everything they knew.

But Delaro had just said that there were a hundred enemy soldiers at the very most. If the enemy was anything other than long-eareds, Ange would assume that they’d underestimated the scale of Epitaph’s forces, in which case their strategy would make sense. In other words, she’d assume they’d convinced their soldiers to brace themselves for death and fight head-on.

But these long-eareds had already dropped a fire weapon on Epitaph’s forces

while they were marching, which had resulted in burned up supplies. Ever since, they'd been worried that their already-strained supplies might run out. It was an extra complication on top of the existing challenges, making this mission even tougher.

In any case, the enemy was using their giant eagles to monitor Epitaph's forces, so at the very least, they had a rough idea of the number of soldiers approaching. If they had such knowledge, then a futile attempt at resistance made little sense.

Destroying the bridge while preparing for a battle against such unfavorable odds put them in a terrible situation that all but guaranteed the death of every soldier. Would such a call really have been made by the same long-eared who'd evaded them thus far—by Yuri Ho?

But despite all her misgivings, Ange was forced to agree with Epitaph. "That's a possibility."

It wasn't necessarily Yuri Ho who'd led the enemy. Through some unusual circumstance, one of the princesses might have assumed command. Ange couldn't think of any explanation for the bridge being destroyed besides the one Epitaph had just proposed.

With the long-eareds' homeland so close, nervous soldiers would be ineffective. The moment their readiness to give their lives faltered, they'd flee to save themselves. Ange's father had taught her so. With the bridge down, the soldiers would have to stand and fight whether they liked it or not. Its destruction might have even been a punishment after the soldiers had considered running. It definitely would have an effect, and having a princess issuing commands on the front line would only embolden them further.

"Lady Angelica, are you familiar with the region surrounding the bridge?" Epitaph asked.

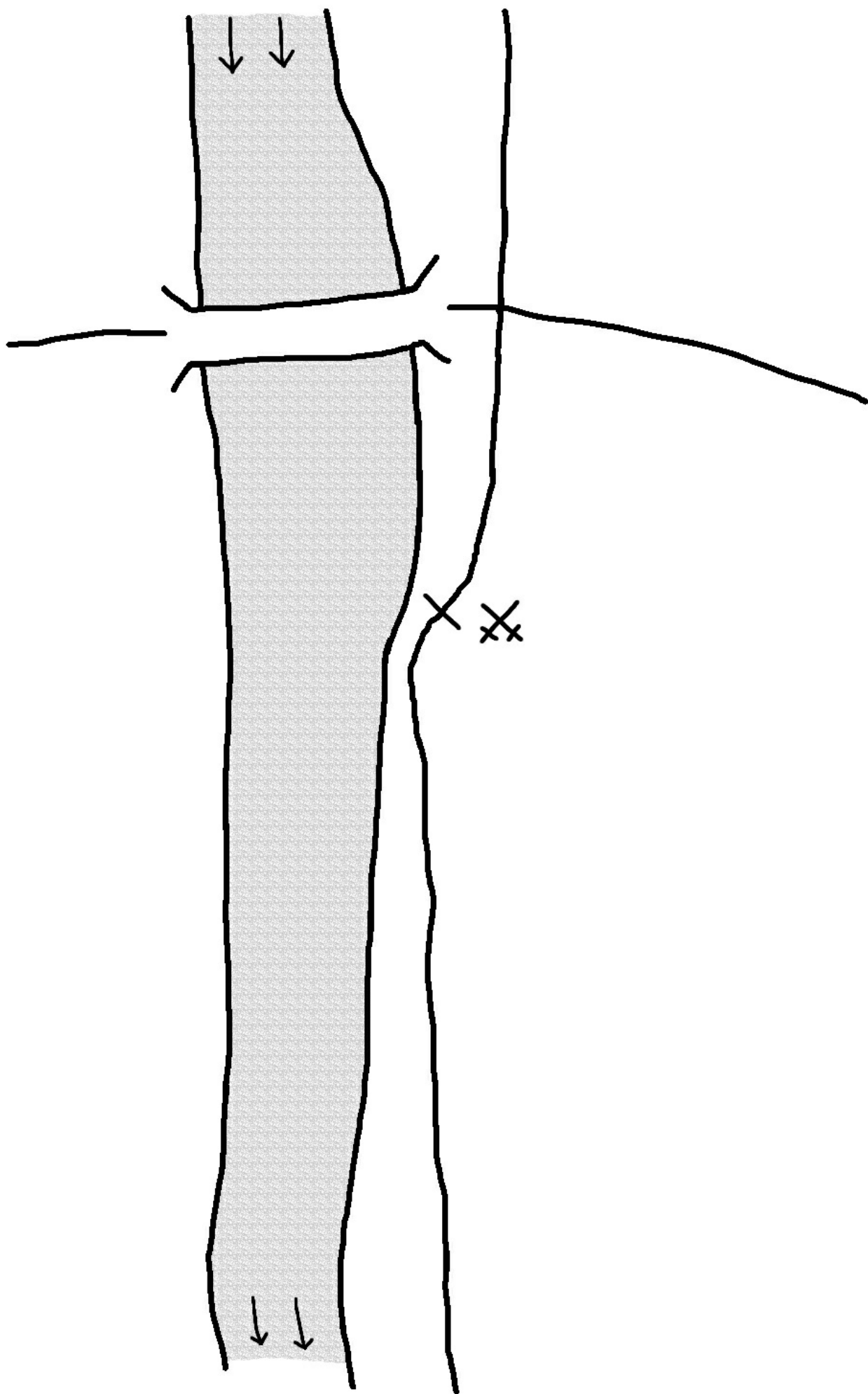
"I have a rough idea, though I don't know it in great detail."

"That's good enough."

The maps Ange had memorized weren't always reliable. Unless a local ruler had put serious effort into creating one, they could be surprisingly inaccurate.

Ange used some parchment they were carrying, along with a pen and some charcoal, to sketch a simple map.

“The arrow indicates the flow of the river,” she explained.



“We’re moving upstream, aren’t we? So it would appear that the enemy has two roads on this side of the river that they can take if they don’t cross the bridge,” Epitaph said.

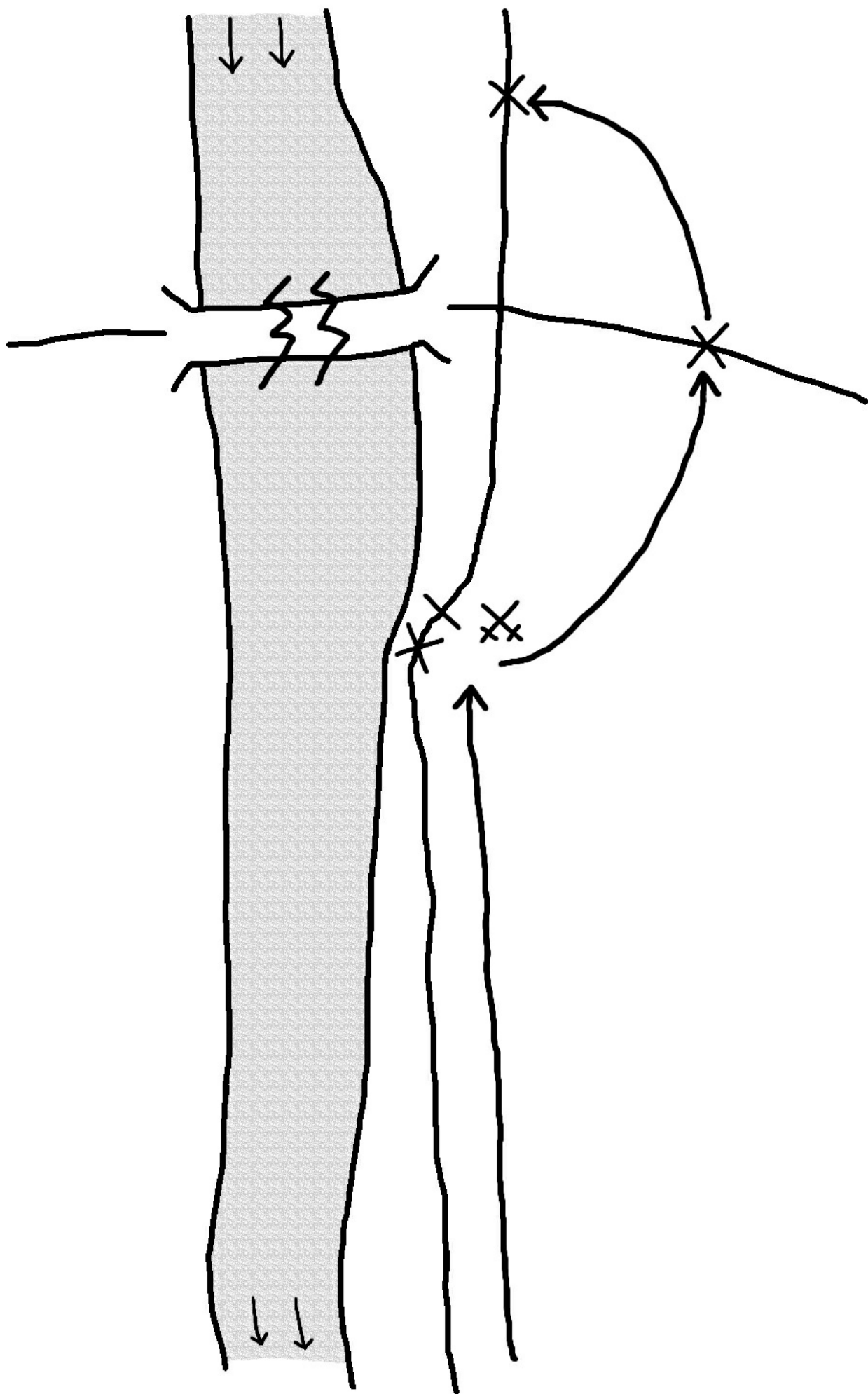
“Not quite. The road that leads further upstream—that is, north toward the mountains—actually turns into a narrow road that’s not suitable for wagons. I don’t believe there’s any route that leads through the mountains and out to the other side.”

She felt she’d seen the road that headed north in a book of pictures that’d been plundered from somewhere, but she could only vaguely remember the details. She didn’t know its purpose.

Ange’s map was based on what she’d heard from Shanti slaves and what she’d read in books, but throughout the expedition she’d learned that much of her knowledge was inaccurate. Sometimes what she thought was a large roadway turned out to be a trail through the forest, and other times she’d discover major roads that weren’t on her map. Still, she felt confident that there wasn’t a road that went over the mountains.

Ange’s memories told her that the only roads that went to the other side of the mountains without crossing the river were further to the north, and they followed the foot of the mountains to detour around them. As for mountain passes that reached the other side via valleys between the mountains, they only existed much further to the south.

“I see... Then here’s what we’ll do. Fortunately, the enemy is waiting for us on the road close to the bridge.” Epitaph pulled Ange’s map closer to him, picked up a pen, and rapidly drew arrows on the map. “We’ll dispatch a unit and have them move like this. How does this look? We’ll tighten the net around those accursed demons.”



I knew he'd suggest that, Ange thought.

As long as the enemy had an escape route, at least some would flee when they faced a force of one thousand. Since Epitaph's force had limited supplies, they couldn't pursue the enemy as far as they pleased. Blocking off the roads like so would give the enemy nowhere to run. For the soldiers carrying it out, it would involve a lot of movement and extra work, but it made sense.

That was Epitaph's plan. Still, many problems remained.

"I'd like you to take on the task of blockading the two roads, Lady Angelica."

One problem was that the plan involved some soldiers moving to a far-off point where orders would be difficult to receive. Since there was a second high-ranking officer here—Ange—she could go with them to remedy that issue, though.

"How will we contact each other?" she asked.

"Use this." Epitaph took a strange arrow from his belongings. "It's a whistling arrow from the Dragon Empire."

Arrows like this, with a whistle affixed in place of the arrowhead, weren't commonly used by the armies of Yeesusdom. Instead, horns were generally sounded in the field.

"We can't communicate with each other through the forest," Epitaph explained, "but I'm sure we'll hear these just fine."

Indeed, an arrow that continued whistling while it flew would be heard throughout the forest. They weren't going to be operating dozens of kilometers away from each other, so they'd probably be close enough to hear each other's whistle arrows during the operation.

"In that case, once I'm in position, I'll fire this arrow to give the signal for us to all charge at once. Is that what you're envisioning?"

"Indeed. As much as I hate to use implements defiled by heretics, it's ideal for demon hunting." Epitaph wore the same unnerving smile as always as he spoke.

"Yes... I suppose so."

Since Ange wasn't particularly pious, she was still trying to get used to Epitaph's religious views—and his general view of the world, for that matter.

Discussions out here on the field were guided purely by the principles of warfare. Expressions of scorn or contempt toward other peoples had no place here. It was like the common military mindset was being watered down, or contaminated somehow.

"Then you accept my proposal?" Epitaph asked.

"Yes, of course," Ange replied. Then she added, "However, I only brought fifty soldiers with me. We should spread out through the forest to ensure no one can escape. We should also position some soldiers on the road to the north just in case. For that reason, I'd like to borrow three hundred or so soldiers from the Volunteer Knight Order."

"Of course. Please take what you need."

Now they could encircle the enemy completely.

"In that case, I'll go feed my soldiers," Ange stated before standing up.

She felt herself growing excited and eager to get started. Even though she hadn't wanted to take on this role at first, it was enough to give her goose bumps. It would be her first battle. This time, she wasn't merely rounding up bandits—it would be her first true taste of war.



"I'm back."

Dolla had appeared before me, and his face suggested that nothing was amiss. He carried his usual spear, similar in form to a halberd, over his shoulder.

"Why'd you come back?"

I was sitting somewhere a little distance away from all the hubbub. This area was empty, since everyone had gone off to carry out one task or another, but it was still our camp.

What's he doing here? They've seen Tellur already. He should be getting her to the other side of the river.

“Because I’m done with the job you gave me,” Dolla replied, sounding grumpy.

I’d told him that once he’d delivered Tellur, he could simply head home. I’d expected him to be on his way to Shiyalta’s royal capital at this point.

“Then who’s escorting Tellur? Did you just abandon her on the other side of the bridge?”

“When I got to the other side, some people from the royal family appeared and said they’d take her off our hands, so I handed her over.” With that report over, he nervously added, “I didn’t mess up, did I?”

No...

If the people he’d mentioned were messengers from the royal family, then handing her to them was fine by me. If they’d come this far north, they were probably royal swords. Even if they weren’t, they’d probably be better suited than Dolla to escorting a princess.

I did have to consider whether they might have been imposters. The most likely culprits in that case would be the witches, because they were best informed. Still, both witch families and chieftain families would face serious consequences if they fooled the royal family and abducted a princess. I didn’t think Tellur was valuable enough for anyone to take that risk. Given the timing and our current situation, they were almost certainly royal swords.

“No, you did fine,” I reassured him. “But how’d you get back?”

I’d have something to say if it turned out he’d pushed his way through the one-way traffic.

“I ran along the railing.”

Huh? What did he just...?

I was shocked, but then again, it *was* Dolla. Even if the crowds had knocked him into the river, this guy would’ve probably come climbing back up the cliff like it was no big deal. An ordinary person wouldn’t dare balance along the railing because the fall would kill them.

“And now you’re alone?” I asked. “Where’s your squad?”

“The people managing traffic flow needed some help, so I left my squad with them.”

“Ah...”

That's fine, I guess.

Keeping the refugees orderly as they crossed the bridge was a job best suited to someone fastidious, and frankly, Dolla wasn't that sort of person. He was right to leave it to others.

“But I think you should've explained things better,” Dolla protested as he knitted his brow.

“Should've explained what?”

“Do you know how scared that girl was?”

The girl? Does he mean Tellur?

I remembered how the color had drained from her face. I hadn't done anything to reassure her at the time because the situation had made me a little too busy to comfort an innocent young girl.

“You know, she thought you were about to sell her to the enemy.”

What? That's what she thought was going on?

“I wouldn't. What gave her that idea?”

I'd always thought that she was a little negative, but now it sounded like she considered herself the victim here. It wasn't too unusual for someone her age and in her position to have a narrow view of the world, but even so, I was amazed that she'd suspect me of trying to sell a princess to save my own skin. She should've known that I'd be finished as a knight if I did anything like that. We'd never get away with selling princesses. If, say, Carol had been captured and we'd negotiated an exchange, that would be another story. Outside of exceptional circumstances, though, people wouldn't stand for it.

Carol, by the way, had already flown an eagle to the other side of the river, despite her strong reluctance to leave.

“Don't waste your time trying to understand what women are thinking,” I told

Dolla.

“Really?” he replied. “The rest of my squad had the same thought. They’ve all been eying you with suspicion for a while now.”

“Well, I did burn the bridge.”

I hadn’t explained to anyone how that had fit into my plan. We’d halted traffic while we’d put some fresh branches over parts of the bridge and then burned them. No one had understood why we’d done it. They were bound to grow suspicious.

But I hadn’t had any time to explain, and I didn’t think I’d ever get everyone to understand anyway. In fact, the soldiers might’ve turned against me if I’d given them an explanation that they didn’t quite grasp.

“You’re really putting everyone on edge,” Dolla warned.

“Yeah, because they all thought they might die here fighting. Meanwhile, their commander’s giving out nonsensical orders and focusing on protecting civilians who most of them don’t care much about.”

“So why not tell them what’s going on?”

“No one would’ve understood me even if I had. Anyhow, as long as they don’t mutiny, I don’t care.”

Even if I made everyone distrust me, it wouldn’t matter as long as everything worked out in the end. Commanding an army wasn’t about getting your subordinates to agree with all of your ideas, after all. Besides, many of the members of our unit had the same youthful mentality as Carol. Much like when Carol and Liao had been arguing, soldiers’ opinions would be split between those who wanted to protect civilians and those who didn’t. The resulting arguments might’ve caused some of them to disobey orders. It was actually easier to get everyone to follow orders if I didn’t tell them the overall plan.

“You know, sometimes you’re—”

“So why’d you come back?” I asked, cutting him off. “Going to join our rear guard? You might find some use for that weapon.”

“What do you mean, ‘might’? We’re going to fight the enemy when they get

here, right?”

“Maybe not.” I took out my pocket watch and opened it. “I’ll wait fifteen more minutes. If I don’t get another report before then, I’ll withdraw our soldiers.”

“What? But why?”

“If I don’t hear anything before then, I’ll send all of our soldiers to the other side of the river. There’s no sense fighting the enemy head-on.”

“But the refugees...”

“I’ve done what I can. People will see that.”

Insisting on a clash with the enemy forces for the sake of protecting civilians wouldn’t accomplish anything besides inflating my own ego. It might’ve looked like a noble act, and maybe I would’ve praised anyone else who attempted it, but it wasn’t my plan. Though I’d probably end up agonizing over whether it was the right choice to the point I’d make myself sick later on.

“Hmph...” Dolla’s expression was complicated as he fell silent. It looked like he had some thoughts he was holding back.

If he’d just decided to spare me a lecture about doing the right thing, I was grateful for it. He certainly had a strong sense of justice, but thankfully, he wasn’t the type to go around forcing his outlook on others.

“Hm?” Dolla suddenly raised his head and looked off in another direction.

I followed Dolla’s gaze and saw someone sprinting rapidly toward us. It was Giaume. Running probably wasn’t Giaume’s strong suit, but like anyone trained at a knight academy, he was able to catch his breath pretty quickly.

“What’s up?” I asked him.

“I was ordered by Sir Liao to ask for your viewpoints. What do you intend to do next?” Giaume spoke faster than normal and seemed a little nervous.

We were still defending the frontline fortification that the scouts had run into after seeing the bridge. We’d be in trouble if any more scouts came, because they might discover that the stone part of the bridge was still standing. If they did approach, we’d have to move forward to meet them before the bridge

became visible and drive them back. It was Liao who'd been placed in command at the fortification.

"Are you guys at the front getting nervous?" I asked.

"More than nervous. We're terrified that you're about to make us do all the fighting alone."

That's their fear?

I realized that most of the unit members I'd positioned there were loyal to the Rube family. Everyone else was further back where we were guiding the refugees. We weren't slacking off, but we certainly had a safer task. The others must've started to wonder whether I'd decided they were sacrifices I was willing to make. Basically, apprehension regarding the upcoming battle was spreading, and they'd grown unbearably tense.

If Liao could trust in my decisions the way Myalo did, his feelings would've been very different, but the two were nothing alike. Perhaps I should've taken that into consideration and done something to alleviate their fears, but I'd had too many other things to think about.

"How about you sit down and rest?" I suggested.

"What do you mean?"

The tense atmosphere must've gotten to him, because he clearly couldn't relax. There was still fear in his eyes.

"I'm waiting to hear a report. If it doesn't reach me in the next...ten minutes or so, I'll have you withdraw from the front line. In that case, you can tell the others."

The scouts we'd deliberately left alive would've reported back to the enemy long ago, and their superiors would've since decided on a course of action.

Unless the main body of their army stopped moving, we could come into contact at any moment now. We were hoping they'd stop, but there was no guarantee. They might simply charge right at us. In that case, sitting in place until they reached us would be a mistake.

"I suppose I'll wait here then." Giaume sat down on a wooden crate.

“Giaume, you know my plan, don’t you? Why are *you* so nervous?”

“Because you’re leaving too much to chance. I hate to think we’re missing the opportunity to escape.”

“No, there’s a difference between predicting the enemy’s next move and leaving things to chance.”

Certain enemy decisions were easy to anticipate and plan for. For example, a rear guard could be deployed when a withdrawal was thought necessary, or troops could be positioned where they’d prevent enemy flanking maneuvers. In our situation, we already knew they were pursuing us, so having a rear guard in place was an obvious decision. They’d probably try to envelop us too, so we could also position soldiers to prevent it.

Those were the textbook strategies, but I was using some ideas that hadn’t been taught to us in school and a few completely original ideas of my own. It certainly was daring, but I’d considered the risks—I wasn’t just leaving things to chance like he said.

“But they didn’t actually stop,” he argued.

“They won’t stop until just before they make contact with us. Any soldiers that are going to leave the main force are still going to stick to the road for as long as possible.”

This was quite a bit further north than the area where I’d been carrying Carol, and the altitude was higher. The sparser trees and undergrowth made it much easier to walk through the forest, but it was still much faster to travel via man-made roads. They’d want to use the road as much as they could.

Stopping at some point far from us would make it harder for them to adapt to any changes in the situation and would make it impossible for the main force to coordinate an attack together with a detachment. For the enemy, there was no advantage to stopping far away, but there were many reasons to keep moving closer. Unless we began firing arrows at them, they might not stop until they were just beyond the range of our spears.

“But if it turns out that the enemy’s swarming toward us like dumb insects, they’re not going to make all these rational decisions you’re predicting,”

Giaume argued.

“Insects wouldn’t think to use a ship to come after us,” I countered.

“It was just a hypothetical.”

“A useless one. We’re not fighting insects. Any hypothetical that assumes the enemy are too stupid to make plans is meaningless.”

Giaume shook his head like he was still anxious. “I don’t get it. Do you know something I don’t? I don’t get why you’re so calm. It’s like you’re sure you’re right.”

I didn’t understand why he’d think so. “‘Sure’...? No, I’m not sure that the enemy’s going to stop.”

I might’ve been sure if I knew more about whoever was in charge of the enemy, but there was no way I could confidently predict the actions of a commander I’d never met.

“Then how come you’re still calm? You’re not worried they’ll charge in and crush us?”

“Giaume... You’re not seeing things clearly because you’re afraid of dying.”

“What?”

“I was saying we’d run right from the start. It might turn out that we have to withdraw by turning and fleeing, but that’s only if the plan fails. If we do, we’ll do so in a way that minimizes our losses. If it comes to it, we can use the refugees like human shields while we’re running, so there’s really nothing to worry about.”

“Well... I guess, but...”

“Even if we do lose soldiers, there’s a big difference between losses in a pointless battle we never had a chance of winning and losses that follow our best attempt to avoid total defeat. Just because there’s a risk doesn’t mean we shouldn’t even try.”

“But...if the enemy doesn’t stop, we’ll lose some soldiers, and we won’t be able to protect the civilians. If that happens, it could destroy your reputation. Doesn’t that scare you?”

“In that case, it’ll all be blamed on my incompetence, won’t it?”

I frankly didn’t care if everyone pinned it all on me and called me inept. What difference would it make if my reputation fell in a nation that was in decline anyway?

“You guys talk like old friends,” Dolla said. “Who is he?”

Dolla was still standing with his arms folded, watching Giaume like he was someone to be wary of.

“You were there when I first introduced him to everyone.”

“I’d remember him if he was one of the unit members.” Dolla probably meant the unit members who’d come from Shiyalta.

“He’s not...”

Giaume gave a brief self-introduction. “I’m Giaume Zuzu. I was put in command of a squad when we were leaving Reforme.”

“Ah, all right. I’ll remember you from now on.” Dolla introduced himself in return. “I’m Dolla Godwin.”

“I don’t care whether you remember me.”

Giaume was probably bothered by the fact that he’d been forgotten.

You’re not the big deal you think you are, Giaume.

“Not many people can argue with Yuri. I’ll remember you.”

There he goes again, saying weird things. He doesn’t need an excuse to remember him.

In any case, Dolla had won their little argument. After all, Giaume had been the one who introduced himself. No matter how much he claimed he didn’t need Dolla to remember him, he couldn’t ask him to forget.

“You make it sound like I don’t listen to people,” I said to Dolla.

“When you don’t care about the opinion of whoever you’re talking to, it’s like you put on a mask, and then everything you say’s empty words. It’s always obvious when you’re not interested.”

I was about to disagree, but no words came out. It was true that I'd switch modes whenever I decided someone wasn't worth talking to. But still, it came as a shock to know that Dolla had seen through it and was calling me out. He must've paid more attention to me than I thought.

"Empty words? At least say I'm tactful."

"There's nothing tactful about it. It's obvious. It's the opposite, in fact: untactful. I mean, tactless. Or was untactful right?" Dolla put his hand to his chin like he'd stumbled on a conundrum.

"Oh, forget it," I told him.

He was just tripping up over his own words now. I started to feel it would be quicker to punch him than wait for him to figure this one out.

It was at that moment that a shadow fell on us, causing the warmth of the sun's rays to vanish for a moment. It wasn't the passing shadow of a cloud or small bird.

"Here it comes," I said while looking upward.

"He's landing here? Seems dangerous."

"This rider's one of the best. Trust him," I replied.

The creature that landed was the eagle that Mira had ridden while he was off on reconnaissance. The mature female eagle looked almost ladylike as the duo descended toward us through a narrow gap in the treetops without disturbing any branches.

After the eagle reduced her speed and came to a graceful stop in front of us, Mira hurriedly undid his restraints and climbed down.

Mira ran straight to me, crying, "I have news to report! Most of the enemy force has stopped while a detachment has begun moving through the forest!"

"All right!" I slapped my knee before I could stop myself. "Did you make sure the sun hid you?"

"Yes, just as you instructed."

"How big was the detachment?"

“About a third of their soldiers... I think.”

A third would likely consist of about three or four hundred. It meant that the group was still big enough to attack us and crush us, even if some of them remained in the forest to stop us from fleeing in all directions.

Our aim hadn’t been to divide and conquer, though. By tricking them into splitting up and waiting until they had us completely enveloped before attacking, we’d bought ourselves some precious time.

“Giaume, take that information back with you. Tell the others to remain in position for now. If they’re still worried, they can send someone out to stealthily observe the enemy’s position.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Oh and, tell them to start making scarecrows.”

“Scarecrows?”

I’d already discussed the idea with Liao, but it was clear from Giaume’s reaction that they hadn’t started making them yet. Liao must’ve doubted that my plan would work at all.

“Liao will know what I mean. Dolla, if you’re planning to join the rear guard, then go with him. The fight will probably be at its most intense there.”

“All right,” Dolla said.

He lifted his spear’s butt off the ground, spun it around, and rested it on his shoulder. It was actually close to being a halberd, but rather than having the beautiful, long blade at its end, it had a short, thick blade that resembled a slightly curved hatchet. Though it was a crude spear with no aesthetic appeal, I suspected it was the work of some master blacksmith, handed down to him from his father.

Dolla must’ve been hungry, because he swiped the dried meat and bread that was next to me before chasing after Giaume, who’d already started running off.



Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.

The arrow flew overhead before vanishing, leaving a long trail of sound in its wake. It hadn't been fired by Ange—it'd come from the north.

"All right. Fire," Ange ordered.

Her subordinate said, "Yes, Ma'am," before nocking another whistling arrow in his longbow.

The bow curved as he drew the arrow.

For a moment there was another shrill *piiii* sound, along with the twang of the bow, but both sounds quickly ceased. The arrow had been destroyed when it hit a large tree branch.

"What are you doing?" Ange chuckled as she chided her subordinate.

"S-Sorry." He bowed his head in embarrassment.

"We've got four more. Calm yourself."

He fired another arrow. This time it avoided the trees completely, causing the *piiiiii* sound to ring out for much longer.

A short while later, another whistling arrow was heard coming from the main camp where Epitaph was waiting. It was a response signaling that he'd heard Ange's arrow.

Now Ange just had to fire another arrow north toward the mountains, and their preparations would be complete.

Ange sought no assistance as she gripped her horse's saddle, put a foot into the stirrup, and climbed up onto its back.

The armor she was wearing was no more than fine chain mail beneath a surcoat. She also had a lightweight metal helmet and a thin piece of cloth that she wore below her nose on the battlefield to hide the fact that she was a woman. Since that was all she was wearing, she was a lot lighter than she'd been when she'd worn plate armor.

"Have them begin marching," Ange told her deputy. "Put an end to the break."

"Yes, Ma'am! Break's over! All troops, prepare to march!"

Once he'd loudly relayed her orders, her soldiers began to move.

As Ange's unit advanced, they encountered the enemy's frontline defenses, which consisted of a simple wall made from timber. The construction was far from impressive—it was little more than a stack of logs of various sizes. They were piled up horizontally, and there weren't any sharpened stakes pointing outward. The obstacle looked easy to cross.

Some way beyond the wall, a thick white line had been drawn across the road. It was some sort of symbol.

Did they use powdered lime? Ange wondered.

"Advance forward fifty paces."

"Advance forward fifty paces!"

Ange's deputy relayed her order, and the soldiers began moving. Just as they were about to cross over the line, they heard the thunderous roar of a gun firing. A moment later, it was followed by a clang. The shot had hit the head of a soldier from the Volunteer Knight Order, knocking him down where he stood.

"Halt!" Ange yelled.

The soldiers came to a complete stop without waiting for her deputy to repeat the order.

As the only person on horseback, Ange could see soldiers at the very front of her column were crouching down to give aid to the fallen man. Like the elite knight he was, the man was already climbing to his feet while shaking his head like someone getting up from a nap.

The soldiers weren't wearing plate armor, but they did have helmets and chain mail. The distance from the spot that the bullet was fired from was over one hundred paces—close enough for a shot to penetrate someone's flesh with a direct hit, but not close enough to penetrate a helmet.

Unlike arrows, the round bullets launched from guns lost their speed quickly as they traveled through the air, despite their burst upon initially leaving the gun.

The enemy had probably stolen a gun from the crusade forces, plundered from the battlefield. It might've even belonged to one of the scouts they'd killed.

"Hm..."

"They haven't fired a second shot."

Ange's deputy of this expedition, Gustave Oldenant, spoke with the gravelly voice of a man approaching old age. He'd become one of Angelica's retainers after serving her family since the days of her father, Lenizicht Sacramenta.

If the enemy continued firing, Ange would need to react somehow. Everything had remained silent since that first shot.

Naturally, Ange's troops had guns of their own. But getting closer and trading shots wasn't a sensible course of action. Their bullets wouldn't penetrate the wall the enemy had built, and her soldiers lacked shields to defend themselves against enemy fire. Such an exchange would result in losses for Ange's side.

If they maintained a distance of one hundred paces, they'd remain too far away for rifles to be effective. The enemy weren't much more than dots in Ange's vision, and it wasn't possible to fire on such small targets accurately. When the enemy had scored a hit, it had probably been a fluke.

It was clear that any attempt at a firearm fight from here would just be a long, drawn-out waste of gunpowder for both sides. A better option would be to order the soldiers to charge in, scale the wall, and then cross swords with the enemy. But that wasn't the task Ange had been given.

Ange's job was to hold the enemy back and prevent them from scattering as the main force led by Epitaph advanced on them from the south. She wasn't there to engage with the enemy and crush them herself. Focusing their efforts on the fortification would also likely leave Ange's soldiers unable to apprehend the blonde princesses as they fled into the forest, giving the girls a chance to escape.

No matter how much stronger her own force was, it wouldn't mean much if the enemy managed to slip their grasp. Indeed, Ange's whole reason for being here was because of the small chance that their most important target might

try to flee via this road. In other words, their best option was to strengthen their position by halting their advance and spreading out into the forest while watching for enemy movements.

“My own soldiers will spread out in both directions as discussed. The volunteer knights should remain here without advancing any further.” Ange decided to place the subordinates she understood best in the forest, while keeping the borrowed soldiers close to her.

Piiiiiii.

Some time later, the sound of yet another whistling arrow rang out.

“What’s happening? Gustave, did you hear anything about this?” Ange asked, sounding slightly irritated.

“No, Ma’am, I didn’t.”

After Ange’s forces had taken up positions over a sickle-shaped area, they were growing increasingly unnerved by the unexpected whistling arrows coming from Epitaph’s force.

Ange hadn’t agreed upon any special messages that could be sent with the arrows, so there was nothing she could discern from the number and type of the arrows fired. Nonetheless, Epitaph’s force kept on firing them.

Each time Ange heard another arrow, she had no idea what it meant. After the first two or three, she worried that her initial response might not have reached Epitaph, and so she’d decided to fire another arrow in response. However, Epitaph had now fired about ten whistling arrows over the course of thirty minutes or so.

Ange felt that something was wrong. Given the superiority of Epitaph’s main force, she didn’t think it was likely that they were in danger, but no one could predict what might happen on the battlefield. Her father had often told her so.

It was possible that a thousand or two thousand soldiers had appeared from over a hill and rushed Epitaph’s forces. When the enemy burned the bridge and cut off their own retreat, it might’ve been because they were confident in their overwhelming superiority.

“I don’t understand it,” Ange said. “Do you think they’re trying to tell us they’re in trouble?”

The sound of the arrows could be intended as a warning, or it might be a request for backup. It was impossible to tell.

“I’m not sure myself,” her deputy, Gustave, replied. “But we expected the enemy to run toward us, yet they appear to be perfectly patient.”

“It’s too soon. It’s been barely any time since Epitaph began his charge.”

If the enemy’s defenses were to suddenly fall apart and their soldiers routed, then they might be sent fleeing toward Ange like balls on a billiard table. They wouldn’t necessarily be driven her way so cleanly, however. Given that not much time had passed, it wasn’t surprising that the enemy was staying put.

“You’re right.” Gustave, being a soldier with experience of many battles, quickly guessed what Ange meant.

She urged him for his opinion. “So what do you think’s happening?”

“I’m unable to reach a conclusion.”

“I...see...”

A pang of anxiety struck Ange’s heart. A great number of soldiers were gathered here, their lives on the line, and yet she couldn’t be certain of the right orders to give to them. The thought that she’d have to make decisions based on guesswork didn’t sit well with her. She’d grown used to making tough decisions during her time spent managing her territory, but mistakes made here couldn’t be fixed. It was the first time she’d felt that her choices carried so much gravity.

As a seasoned war veteran, Gustave saw right through Ange’s feelings. “We’ll simply obey the orders you give us, Lady Angelica. No one will question those orders later if a misjudgment results in some losses.”

“All right...”

The loyalty of her soldiers just made her wish she could lead them all home victorious. But victory in war was rarely, if ever, achievable without sacrificing a number of lives.

“Oh, you just called me Lady Angelica. I keep telling you—”

Ange was interrupted by cries of, “A message! A message!” as someone appeared from the forest yelling at the top of his voice. Before long, the man had fully emerged from the forest, wearing nothing but his pants and a vest. He must’ve thrown away everything that had weighed him down in order to run faster.

The messenger spotted Ange, then came to a stop. His legs looked ready to give way. He rested both hands on his knees, like he might collapse, and hunched over while desperately trying to catch his breath.

“Haah, haah, haah,” he panted.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Calm down,” Ange said.

“Haah. War Minister Epitaph said to immediately...” The man pointed directly to his left with one hand—toward the enemy’s makeshift wooden wall—while trying to catch his breath. “...attack.”

“What?”

“Haah, haah.” His breathing was still heavy. He looked so pale that he might’ve collapsed any second.

“I know you’re tired, but you’re going to have to give me more details. What happened?”

“Hah... Ugh.”

The man began to vomit where he stood. The meal that he’d eaten before the start of the operation was now filth collecting at his feet.

He must’ve pushed himself to his limit as he’d run through the trees. There was evidence that he’d fallen several times in the process—his vest was stained with mud, and blood was weeping from multiple cuts in his bare skin.

He lifted his hand to his mouth to wipe away the vomit. “M-My apologies...”

“It’s all right. You’ve performed your duty well.”

“War Minister Epitaph...said we miscalculated. The enemy’s crossing the bridge at this moment. His order is to attack immediately.”

Ange felt like a cold knife had just been plunged into her temple. At first, she wanted to turn her rage toward the scouts for their incompetence, but then—as her thoughts became calmer—she felt her anger had been misplaced. The scouts couldn't have been wrong about the bridge burning. Elite soldiers from the Papal State wouldn't have just *imagined* seeing the bridge ablaze. It was equally hard to speculate that they'd turned traitorous and deliberately returned with false information. However, it wasn't the time to think about such things.

"The enemy wasn't there. All we found on their defensive wall were the scouts' bodies. They'd changed them into different armor."

Ange looked back at the wall that stood in her path. The figures she saw there were moving. Unless there was a southern heretic using voodoo to reanimate corpses, these soldiers were living and breathing.

"Good work," Ange praised the messenger. "If you weren't given any other orders, then you may rest."

Ange began to slowly turn her horse around.

"This is an urgent command from War Minister Epitaph! We're to advance forward immediately!" she yelled, then drew her sword and thrust it in the direction of the road. "Forward!"

She was about to strike her horse's abdomen with her foot to make it charge forward when something happened—her foot caught on something and wouldn't move.

It was Gustave. "My Princess! Please wait!"

"What?!" Ange turned her head while bidding her horse to remain still.

"We're few in number and the enemy has a gun! Not only that—you've left your armor behind, My Princess!"

Indeed, besides her thin metal helmet, Ange was protected by nothing but chain mail beneath her surcoat. Half of her face was covered by a black cloth to hide the fact she was a woman, but that wouldn't offer the same protection as a steel visor. With the exception of Epitaph, every soldier had left any thick metal plate armor on the ship.

“You’re the only one on horseback, My Princess! It’s too dangerous!”

Horses weren’t particularly well-suited to traveling through a forest, so Ange hadn’t brought any mounted soldiers with her from the main force. That made her the only mounted soldier in her detachment, causing her to tower above everyone else.

“I don’t care!” she replied.

“Then at least stay back from the front!”

“Gah...”

Ange came close to telling him to shut his mouth, but she knew there was sense in his words, so she held her tongue.

Once the order had been relayed, the members of the Volunteer Knight Order up ahead began arranging themselves into a line.

Ange gave the order to men under her command who she’d assigned as orderlies. “Yaco, Gillinan! Command the right and left flanks and advance through the forest at full speed. Order the men to envelop the wall as we attack it! Now go!”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“At once, Ma’am!”

Yaco and Gillinan leaped into action, disappearing into the forest on either side of the road.

In the meantime, the Volunteer Knight Order had finished forming a line and begun to advance forward under the orders of several different officers without Ange. Only when she was at the back of the column did she begin to follow on her horse.

The soldiers were moving slower than she’d anticipated. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it was a reminder these weren’t the men she was familiar with. Such discrepancies were to be expected, since these weren’t soldiers that she’d trained herself. She couldn’t expect them to act like extensions of herself from the moment she took command. They did at least

move forward or pull back when she ordered them to. She thought it best to imagine she was in command of some extremely disciplined mercenaries.

After enough time had passed for the Volunteer Knight Order to move fifty paces forward, there was another gunshot.

One of the soldiers at the front collapsed. He appeared to have been hit in the abdomen, and the chain mail he was wearing hadn't been enough to stop a bullet at this distance. But the Volunteer Knight Order showed no fear. They filled the gap he'd left in a machinelike manner.

All the while, the gunshots continued to fire, albeit not too rapidly. They seemed to come from a single gun, which wasn't enough to repel a sizable force.

Once the soldiers had advanced another twenty paces, Ange yelled, "All troops, charge!"

An officer cried, "Yah orlan Yeesus!"

The response cried by the soldiers was, "Oh carges dorlan!"

Ange knew what these words meant—the first, "For God and His Son!" and the second, "We volunteer our lives!"—but she'd never heard them used before. It was a unique command issued to members of the Volunteer Knight Order before a charge.

With a battle cry of, "Wroooh!" the soldiers all charged at once. They covered the distance in an instant. Soldiers were soon grabbing the wall and climbing over it. It was no higher than a man's chest, so it was easily scaled.

However, the moment any soldier made it onto the wall, they threw themselves backward like they'd been attacked from below. The enemy had been crouched and waiting behind it, ready to spring with their spears the moment it was crossed.

As the line of soldiers at the front fell apart, soldiers began to climb onto the wall while thrusting their own spears downward.

"Continue the attack!"

As Ange drew close, it became clear how weak the enemy was. There were

probably only about fifty enemy soldiers. Most of them had been positioned at either side of the wall, trying to prevent anyone from going around it. There weren't many left to defend the wall itself. Although it was an effective defensive position in concept, it would fall apart in this case—the barricade itself could be easily attacked from its left and right sides.

But then the enemy did something unexpected.

One of their soldiers at the front stepped back as another appeared from behind to replace him. Then he waved some sort of pot over the Volunteer Knight Orders' heads, as if fanning them with it. Liquid spilled from the pot.

"Aaargh!"

Ange could hear the screams clearly from where she was. She soon realized what had happened—it was hot oil.

The pot itself was then thrown, showering the soldiers with the remaining oil and hitting one of their helmets hard. The contact made a great clanging sound, like a gong being struck.

"Don't flinch! Forward!" the officers at the front demanded.

One of the wall's defenders appeared with another pot, but this time attackers behind those at the very front pulled them away from the wall by their chain mail. It meant they avoided a direct hit from the oil.

The momentum was gone from their charge now, but it wasn't because they feared the hot oil. The liquid had soaked into the wooden logs forming the wall, making it slippery. Some of the attackers even slipped over completely right in front of the wall.

Soldiers who fell down in the front row made for easy prey. The enemy swiftly impaled them like spearfishermen.

Ange couldn't help but cluck her tongue as she watched her own force being skewered by a weaker enemy, despite its clear superiority. As her patience ran out, she forced her way past her soldiers and rode her horse toward the front.

"What're you doing?! Isn't this the Volunteer Knight Order whose deeds fill the history books?! Show me your courage!" she yelled as loud as she could.

“Whoever’s in front of you, just shove their ass forward and it’ll get them over this pathetic little wall!”

As she spoke, she looked at the wall’s left and right edges. It was hard to see much because of all the people gathered there, but she noticed thick metal wire running from tree to tree.

The wire was only as high as a person’s waist, but that was the problem. Getting past it was awkward. It would take some effort to climb over, but it wasn’t high enough to get under it without crawling. Even if they tried to detour around it, it made it hard to control the ground, and their charge would weaken along the way. Indeed, their advance had been slowed severely right where they encountered the metal wire.

Ange couldn’t help but be impressed. *How can a single strand of metal wire cause so many problems? They’ve put real thought into this.*

But Ange’s force was breaking through at both sides regardless. She didn’t know how much wire they’d set up, but it could be cut easily enough once the enemy was pushed back. It shouldn’t have been enough to stop her soldiers.

Ange continued moving forward.

Amid the cries of fighting soldiers, a few words spoken in Shanish caught Ange’s ear: “Retreat! Retreat!”

Her reaction was like a reflex. “The enemy’s retreating! Keep pushing!”

It was then that a man appeared on the wall and threw what appeared to be a bottle of wine at the heads of the soldiers at the front. The instant the bottle broke, the soldiers became an inferno.

Ange recognized it in an instant—it was the same weapon she’d seen dropped from one of their eagles. She knew it would slow down the advance of her troops.

These were the elite soldiers of the Volunteer Knight Order, but they couldn’t help but back off at the sight of their fellow men being burned alive before them. Even if they didn’t, the heat of the flames was enough to prevent anyone from charging through.

Ange's gaze dropped to her waist as she tried to draw the sword from its sheath to reprimand the soldiers.

"Princess!" she heard her deputy cry.

She looked up once more. The same man had reappeared. He was on the wall, down on one knee as he took aim with his rifle.

The soldiers in front of him should've run him through, but they were distracted by the fire and flailing wildly.

As the gun's muzzle became circular in her vision, she felt a strong pull on the surcoat at her waist. An instant later, Ange felt a strong impact to her head and lost consciousness.

"—cess! Princess!"

"Ngh..." Ange opened her eyes to see a familiar face. "Gustave... What's wrong?" she asked, muttering the name of her deputy.

"My Princess, have you fully regained your senses?"

"Stop calling me 'princess.' I've told you before..."

"I'm sorry, but we're in a battle right now."

A battle? The fog cleared the moment she heard the word.

Her head was throbbing.

"Ugh... What happened?"

"You were shot, but your helmet deflected the bullet."

She could feel that her helmet had been replaced with bandages. The dull pain filled her head completely.

When Ange tried to rise, Gustave stopped her. "Please don't get up!"

"I'm fine... I can handle this."

Ange sat up and found that she wasn't dizzy.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked.

"Yes."

The source of the pain seemed to be the left of her forehead where her hairline started. An incredible ache was radiating from that point, making everything feel hazy, like her brain was being shaken. But she wasn't going to pass out, and she felt well enough to walk.

Ange put her hands to her nose and ears and was relieved to find that they were all dry. She'd heard that a skull fracture would cause them to bleed or leak mucus. She tilted her head and tapped her ear, as if trying to remove water, but she couldn't feel the sensation of liquid moving around inside. Everything seemed fine.

She took Gustave's hand when he offered it and climbed to her feet.

"How long was I out?"

"About three minutes."

"Gah..."

It wasn't a long time, nor was it short—especially not when the battle was at a turning point.

She scanned the battlefield, and when she saw the great bonfire burning before her, she stared at it dumbfounded.

Ah, the fire spread to oil-soaked logs, she soon realized. She recognized the characteristic smell of something volatile, like a pot of oil that had been placed on an overheated stove.

The Volunteer Knight Order's soldiers hadn't been able to advance through the fire, so they were making large detours to the left and right. Several hadn't reached the other side of the wall yet.

"Do we have them surrounded?" Ange asked.

"The enemy retreated quickly after you were shot. Once clear of our detachments at either side of the road, they resumed their offensive... I believe it's chaos beyond the wall."

They predicted our every move... We did everything by the book, but they turned our every decision against us.

Now that the enemy had avoided the coordinated charge, they couldn't be

attacked from multiple directions. A counterattack would quickly cause confusion.

“I’m going to go take command.”

Although Gustave seemed conflicted, he saluted Ange. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Ange couldn’t help but feel frustrated. She wanted revenge, and all she had to do was push the enemy to achieve it.

The bridge might’ve been standing, but they wouldn’t be able to use it. Chances were, they were waiting for a mass of refugees to cross first. They had no other reason for mounting their defense here. Unless there was something to their backs that they were defending, it was meaningless to put up a fight. That meant the enemy couldn’t just keep retreating.

First, Ange had to bring order to the chaos so that her force could keep pushing.

“You can’t be sure that we won’t be fired on again,” Gustave warned. “Please try not to approach the front.”

“I know that!”

Ange mounted her horse once more—her deputy had stopped it from running off—then began advancing.

There was still a powerful ache in her head.

V

“Yuri! Everything’s fine at our side! Everything’s on schedule!” Myalo cried as she arrived on a plainrunner.

I looked at my watch. It was one minute until the time that Liao and I had agreed on that morning.

“What about the bridge?!” I yelled.

“They’re almost all across!”

“Got it! You get yourself across first!”

“Yes, Sir... Stay safe!” Myalo rode off in the direction of the bridge.

“Scatter the remaining caltrops!” I ordered.

Several people reached into their pouches, pulled out pieces of metal, and threw them down on the enemies’ heads.

We had to spread them thin because we didn’t have many, but we were done here now. The front that Liao was currently defending was further uphill than the enemy. That meant they could roll burning carts into the opposing soldiers with spectacular effect. We didn’t have that option here because the road wasn’t sloped.

We were thoroughly outnumbered, so any face-to-face fighting would be over sooner than a contest of strength between an adult and a child. But scattering caltrops would injure some of the soldiers, turning them into obstacles that slowed down everyone behind them as well.

“All right! Retreat to the final line! Retreat! Retreat!” I waved my hand high over my head as I yelled. At the same time, I was running.

My feet hurt. My left foot always hurt, but now the right one did too. I’d gotten carried away in my attempt to shoot their commanding officer and ended up burning my toes a little.

Rather than give up, the enemy was giving chase.

On the road in front of us was a conspicuous white line. I glanced back to check no one had fallen too far behind.

“Cut it down!” I yelled.

The woodcutter on standby within the trees looked surprised, probably because a few allies hadn’t cleared it yet. We still had time to reach the distance before the tree hit the ground, though. I felt a sense of urgency growing inside me; I wished he’d hurry.

“Just do it! Cut it down!”

When I repeated myself, the woodcutter raised his axe before swinging it into an existing notch in a tree’s trunk. But a single swing hadn’t been enough to fell it. He swung for a second, then a third time.

A good three seconds later, enough time for everyone to get over the line, the tree began to creak as its fibers gave way under the strain and the whole thing came falling down.

The enemy were on us, but those at the front saw the tree coming at them and slowed to a stop as they stared up at it.

“All right! Keep going until we’re over the bridge! If you’re injured, dump your gear and run!”

I kept running as I looked behind me. The tree hit the ground with a *crash* as the branches that had been high in the air fell onto the road.

As we reached the bridge, Liao’s detachment arrived at virtually the same time. His group—who’d also cut down a tree—looked like it was in bad shape, just like mine.

“Liao.”

“Yuri.”

For a moment, he panted heavily with exhaustion. When our eyes met, I felt some wordless communication between us.

“Get yourselves across!” I said.

“Do as Sir Yuri ordered! Get across as soon as you can!” Liao repeated the same command.

Our forces swarmed over the bridge.

Most refugees were already across, so only a few stragglers remained on this side. There was a dense crowd building on the opposite side, but they’d made it to safety.

Working out the timing had been Myalo’s job, and she’d performed the task flawlessly. Holding our ground for too long would’ve resulted in needless losses, while running too soon would result in most of the fighting occurring in the vicinity of the bridge. The timing of our arrival was right in the sweet spot.

“Sorry. Looks like I made you fight after all,” I said.

Liao looked a little surprised. “I don’t mind something like this. I just didn’t want to do anything that meant certain death.”

That was understandable. Liao was always reminding me that he wanted glory in battle, but only if it benefited him as the Rube family’s heir.

“I wish I could’ve found a way to get this done without any fighting at all,” I said. “That was asking a little much, though.”

Lives had been lost while we were defending our wall, and Liao’s detachment was likely to have had a similar experience.

The soldiers lucky enough to have survived were now desperate to cross the bridge. None of them wanted to die. That feeling was especially strong after they’d all come so close to death in battle.

“Looks like the enemy on your side got pretty worked up,” Liao said.

We’d both managed to buy just enough time—there hadn’t been any seconds left to spare. When the enemy realized they’d been duped, they’d made a desperate bid to at least take revenge on us.

Although they weren’t too close yet, I could still see the soldiers I’d just fought approaching us from uphill. And down the hill where Liao had come from, I could see even more forces charging toward us, clambering over the tree one after another. The tree itself was barely visible now, obscured by the men that had already crossed it. Only a few branches from the treetop could be seen.

“The ones on your side too,” I replied. “Taunt them, did you?”

“Might’ve.”

I smiled and chuckled. The whole situation started to feel amusing. The enemy—and death itself—was charging toward us like a wave, yet it didn’t scare me. It felt like whatever challenge they might throw at us next, I’d keep everything under my control.

“Hey, what’s he doing?” I asked.

“Looks like he’s sharpening his weapon,” Liao replied.

Up ahead, I could see Dolla crouched by the roadside, frantically sharpening

his spear. He was pouring water from a canteen onto a rough whetstone, then scraping his spear tip against it with almost enough enthusiasm to create smoke.

Dolla was an odd sight. The damage to the helmet lying by his side suggested it had taken numerous sword hits, and even his chain mail armor—he was wearing two layers, for some reason—looked thoroughly frayed and worn out. There was a cloth tied around his head like a traditional Japanese hachimaki headband, and it was stained bright red. He'd probably used it to stop the blood from dripping into his eyes after he'd suffered a head injury.

Just how hard did that guy fight?

"Dolla, you took a hit?" I asked him.

Dolla poured a little more of his canteen's water onto his spear to clean off the sludge, then drank what was left. He stood up, then dumped his whetstone and canteen by the roadside. A quality whetstone wasn't something anyone would readily throw away, but this rough thing was little more than a hunk of sandstone. It wouldn't be missed.

"That's why I had to rest," Dolla replied.

He approached with his spear in one hand, giving off the distinct smell of profuse sweat that had dried and mixed with blood. He was so much more intense than when I'd seen him a short while ago. He was like a different person—as if there was more affecting him than just his newfound battle experience.

"Can I count on you?" I asked.

"Sure."

"If they draw their rifles, get close to the railing. I'll handle it."

I raised the rifle I was holding so he could see it. It originally belonged to the scouts we'd killed first, so it wasn't as good as the one I'd purchased from the Albio Republic. The barrel was shorter, though, which made it easier to maneuver.

"Got it. Let's go then."

"Okay."

Liao was already moving. I set foot onto the bridge behind him.

The enemy was almost on us, but our small group wouldn't be crossing just yet. We still had to hold out until the crowd at the other end of the bridge had cleared.

Once I reached the bridge's center, I rested my back against the railing and began to prepare the rifle. I only had two bullets left.

"Eight men approaching our rear! Ready your spears!"

It happened to be Liao's soldiers who were at the back of the crowd crossing the bridge, so Liao had been the one who'd given the order.

Liao issued the order a second time to a soldier I didn't know. "You too, Garry! Keep that spear up!"

Since Dolla and I were still in the middle of the bridge, the soldier was likely reluctant to keep his spear pointed toward us.

"Come at me!" I heard Dolla roar.

The enemy had caught up with us.

When I lifted my head to look, I saw Dolla raise his spear like he was thrusting it into the air.

The roars from friends and foe alike were already creating a great din on the bridge, but when Dolla's passionate roar stood out above the others, it must've felt threatening to the enemy.

But the sound of Dolla's voice only struck fear into the enemies at the very front as they swarmed around him—those behind them didn't slow down. As a whole, the enemy continued to push forward without stopping for a moment.

When the gap between both sides closed, Dolla swung his spear down with incredible force with a cry of, "Hgrah!"

His massive body, hardened through constant training, propelled his spear as his well-honed techniques determined its course. A knight held out his shield, but Dolla's spear broke it apart in an instant. As the axe-shaped point came down on the knight's shoulder, it sliced through his chain mail like it was cloth, cutting into his body.

Following up on this swing, which had almost looked powerful enough to completely cut the man in two, Dolla kept moving. He turned full circle and used the momentum to step closer and lower his body to the ground. His spear flew at the enemy's legs like it had been carried by the wind, and the blade cut through four legs like they were mere bamboo, leaving them strewn across the bridge.

Dolla balanced himself by raising his leg high like a dancer, then he leaped forward across the stone surface.

It was incredible. I could never have fought like this. Such feats were only possible for someone blessed with Dolla's large size.

For a moment, I felt something like a mixture of admiration and aspiration. But a single hero couldn't hold the bridge alone like some scene from a war story. The enemy continued to push relentlessly forward.



The enemy's advance had been largely unaffected. Those with injured legs were shoved back by the advancing soldiers, or they covered their heads as people stepped over them.

I looked behind me and saw that people were still filling a quarter of the bridge. Dolla held the center, but he was gradually being pushed back.

Damn. I should've saved my last firebomb.

"We can't hold! Can't we move any faster?!" Liao yelled.

Dolla continued to mow down enemies as he backed away, but they were threatening to overwhelm him. He took one step back after another, and before long, he'd backed off ten paces. He'd gotten dangerously close to the crowd still crossing the bridge.

I took off the cloak I was wearing and threw it over the railing down into the river.

"Hey! They're not all across yet!" Liao sounded panicked.

"It's fine!" I yelled back. "The whole thing won't collapse!"

Probably.

On my signal, two archers emerged from the trees and used the flaming torches they held to ignite their arrows. Once shot, those arrows flew at the central pier of the bridge, leaving fiery trails behind them.

I leaned over the railing to look down at the piers. On the opposite side of the wooden bridge that we'd burned down, we'd left a mountain of dry leaves that would easily ignite. A single fire arrow was enough to turn them into a powerful blaze.

"Put the fire out!" I heard an enemy cry.

The enemy spoke Kulatish. It wasn't the first time I'd heard this voice, or rather, this cry. It belonged to a woman. It was barely audible above the loud voices of the men, but there was a unique quality to it that caught my ear.

"Use your canteens or whatever you've got! Pour water on it!" she was shouting.

I was surprised she'd even noticed the fire—not that it would do her any good.

The fire was burning at the pier's base, a good distance below the bridge's surface. A rapid succession of buckets poured over it would put it out, but a little water from a canteen would just scatter in the wind before it could reach the fire.

"Dolla! Don't go down with them!"

Just as I yelled my warning, there was the sound of an explosion and the whole bridge shook like something had given way beneath us.

Will it actually collapse? I was worried for a moment.

We'd had masons cut into the stones at the pier's base, then we'd filled the holes with gunpowder. To make sure the explosion would blow the arches apart, wedges had been driven between the stones.

The stability of the bridge depended on the physical properties of the semicircular shapes of its arches. As they supported the tons—or tens of tons—of weight above them, they were compressed by the weight, creating an incredible amount of friction wherever one stone in an arch made contact with another. That ensured it wouldn't lose its structural integrity.

Now, all we had to do was see what would happen when wedges were driven deeper between these stones.

The entire bridge swayed. Gaps appeared between stones that had never moved since the day it was built, and as its support gave way, the bridge began to move under its own weight.

"Hey! Dolla!"

Dolla likely hadn't heard me, because he was still standing on the shaking bridge, wielding his spear, and refusing to take another step back.

Now's the time to run. He needs to pull back, but he must've gotten carried away. It's like Benkei's final stand in Hiraizumi.

"Can you hear me?!"

I took a step forward, grabbed his belt, and yanked him back.

“Whoa!” Dolla cried out in an odd voice.

“You’ll die!”

Dolla stumbled backward as I flung him behind me like a heavy piece of luggage.

Suddenly, I felt an eerily familiar sensation of floating. It was like an elevator going down, or a plane landing.

Whoa, it’s collapsing.

The stone beneath me cracked apart and ceased to be a solid surface. When I tried to walk, I simply felt broken rock giving way at my feet. But I could still move my body. I reached out with my right hand.

Just as I’d sunk to my waist, someone grabbed my hand. I gripped them tightly in return and tried to walk on the crumbling rubble beneath me.

The hand pulled me in powerfully as I crawled up, as if my feet were seeking purchase on a wall.

The hand I was holding belonged to Liao. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, you saved me.”

That was close.

My body was still shaking from excitement and fear.

I realized that I’d foolishly kept my grip on the rifle with my left hand the whole time. I should’ve thrown it away, but I still had it.

Well, I’m safe anyhow.

I turned around and looked back. The bridge was no more.

Looking down, I saw the rubble being carried off by the river as sandy clouds of dust rose into the air.

Some of the enemy soldiers were clinging on to large pieces of rubble that were above the river’s surface, but cold water crashed down on them like a cliffside on a stormy day. They’d soon lose their grip and be carried away.

The force of the fall must’ve sent them tumbling because, surprisingly, there

weren't any soldiers left on the small island formed in the river's center. It seemed that anyone that had been standing on the bridge had fallen to a watery grave.

Now there was no way for the enemy to reach me from across the river, and I was back in my homeland.

"Is it...over?" I heard myself ask.

It had been so long since I'd left Shiyalta. I was worn down mentally by the countless problems we'd faced, but it was finally over. It was really happening. I'd been embroiled in the war all the way back, but my involvement in that was also over. It all felt too good to be true.

"Yeah. Looks like we won," Liao said.

We won. The word felt like some new and unfamiliar concept. *We really did. We actually won.*



There were still enemy soldiers standing on the opposite side of the destroyed bridge, but no amount of resentful glares could change the fact that we were separated by the deep valley carved by the river. We'd made a successful escape.

The crowd of people packed into the forest was gradually thinning out as everyone made their way deeper into Shiyalta. Getting all these refugees in order was going to take a lot of effort, but the worst was over.

"How about a victory cheer?" Liao suggested.

"What? Like, 'Woo-hoo!'"

I can't be bothered.

"No, I mean since the enemy's still here, we can declare something to them."

"Declare something?"

Something like "We win!"? Yeah, maybe we should, I decided.

History was, after all, told by the victors. After all they'd put us through, I might end up feeling better after I'd told them to scurry back home with their

tails between their legs.

“You don’t have to if you don’t feel like it.”

“No, I’ll say something.”

“All right. Use this.”

Liao passed me a megaphone. It was cone-shaped and made from some sort of metal—maybe copper. He must’ve bought it in Reforme while I was absent. It’d been hanging from his plainrunner since we’d been reunited, but it must’ve been too much trouble to pick it up every time he gave orders. I’d never seen him use it. After it had spent a long time hanging there uselessly, the megaphone’s time had finally come.

“If you don’t mind, sure,” I said as I took it from him.

Now, what’ll I say? I spent a little while considering my choice of words.

Before long, I realized that I could spend hours thinking about this. I was never going to be satisfied with what I’d come up with unless I’d spent a whole night writing at a desk. The enemy would probably get bored and leave before I was done thinking.

I guess I’ll just wing it. Here goes. I decided to begin with a little banter. “Hear me, crusaders! Thank you for making the long journey into the lands of the north to visit us! My name is Yuri Ho! Sadly, the force under my command wasn’t large enough for a grand battle today, but I hope you’ll agree that our approach—though unconventional—proved to be a successful strategy! If you’d acknowledge me as the victor in my first battle, I’d consider it the greatest praise! I pray for your safe return home!”

I lowered the megaphone.

“All right.” *That should do it.*

“I didn’t understand a word.” Liao sounded disappointed.

Well, there wouldn’t have been any point saying it all in Shanish.

A man who was approaching the edge of the bridge caught my eye. In his fancy, deep-purple cloak, he looked like the enemy’s leader. Until I saw him, I’d been under the impression that the female knight who’d fought on horseback

with a cloth covering her face was their leader. The color purple signified noble status among the enemy, so an officer in drab clothing wouldn't normally have a subordinate dressed in purple. He had to be their commander. There was even a chance that he was the pope's nephew, Epitaph Palazzo. That probably wasn't the case, though.

My knowledge of the enemy was shallow, but I couldn't imagine anyone that important would've been sent so deep behind enemy lines. No one with that kind of lofty status would've been here, where there was a high risk of dying in battle.

Could the woman we'd fought be the guy-in-purple's...lover?

I really had no idea. I'd have to look into it later. As I was musing over all of this, I was also paying close attention to their movements.

"Shoot him dead!" I heard a voice on the opposite side say.

Someone beside the man in purple raised his bow, drew, and took aim.

"Watch out!"

The arrow was already in flight when Liao grabbed my clothing.

I'd watched the soldier draw his arrow, so it hadn't been a surprise attack. I simply took a step to the side out of the arrow's path, but then I realized that it might've hit someone behind me.

However, the arrow struck something metal and was knocked off course with a *clang* before it could hit anyone. The axe-like blade of Dolla's spear had acted as a shield.

"Not exactly graceful in defeat, are they?" I noted. My little speech must've gotten to them.

"Who cares about that? Be more careful," Dolla warned me.

Apparently, he'd forgotten that I'd had to save him just a minute ago.

It occurred to me that I was still holding the gun that I'd intended to use back when I'd offered Dolla cover. Finally, I had an opportunity to use it.

I opened the touch hole cover and checked to ensure there was gunpowder

inside. I thought it might've fallen out while the gun had been jostled around, but surprisingly, it was all still in there.

I lifted the gun and took aim at the man in purple. No sooner than I'd done so, the enemy soldiers realized my intention and tried to pull him back by his shoulders and clothing. Despite their attempts, the man remained where he stood, undaunted.

I guessed his attitude was, *"Try it, I dare you! I ain't scared of your bullets! You think a gangster's scared of a gun?"*

On the other hand, maybe not—he was no gangster. Still, he had guts either way. Maybe he was just cocky because he knew I was a little too far away to hit him.

The reason the enemy had shot at me with a bow rather than a gun was because a skilled archer could fire with greater accuracy. The downside was that arrows were slower, so it wasn't too hard to dodge one if you saw it coming.

I adjusted my aim to compensate for the gun's inaccuracy, then pulled the trigger. The rifle's match cord dropped with a *clank*. When the gunpowder exploded, the deafening sound left my ears ringing.

I'd missed. I grazed his head, but ultimately hit the man beside him.

It was frustrating that I couldn't fire two shots in succession. If only I could've adjusted my aim without lowering the gun, I was certain that the second shot would hit. But that wasn't possible, because I'd have to load gunpowder and a fresh bullet into the gun's barrel first.

In any case, they'd fired one shot and we'd fired one back. If I tried to fire on them again, they'd probably take cover.

"We're withdrawing!" I yelled before turning my back on the battlefield. "All troops, move away from the bridge before they shoot at us again!"



That night, we set up camp on the edge of the closest village with an inn.

All of our tents had been set up in the town square and given to the refugees.

Each one was no doubt packed full of sleeping people. The same would be true inside the town's buildings that the Rube family had been able to requisition on short notice.

The area surrounding the town was utterly barren. The trees had been felled recently, turning the area into an expanse of tree stumps and lumber simply left there to dry. It was a poor choice of place to sleep, but that was where we'd gathered—a little over three hundred of us, with nothing except what we'd been able to carry.

Despite the slightly cloudy summer sky, we weren't cold. We were all gathered around a massive bonfire. The flames consumed the crackling firewood, bathing the area in red light and warming us all with the heat they radiated.

We also all had alcohol to drink.

Those with injured legs were sitting on the drying timber, but everyone else was standing.

"Everyone, you did good work today!" I said in a loud voice as I raised my drink. I was standing just inside the ring of people encircling the bonfire. "It's thanks to your bravery that the enemy turned back in disgrace with nothing to show for their efforts! We're the victors!"

Now I gave a true victory cheer, belated though it was, and the others around me joined in. A great "Urooooh!" resounded through the air around us.

Once the echoes had died down, I continued. "The situation being what it is, I couldn't get enough for everyone to get drunk, but I hope you'll all enjoy a drink tonight! I think I've said enough already. I could sing your praises all night, but who'd want me to stand here and ramble on about it?"

As I finished my speech, the mood lightened, and I heard some of the soldiers begin to laugh.

Once I'd stepped back and sat down, Carol stepped forward to take my place. Her blonde hair, though dirty with dust from the battlefield, took on a red glow in the fire's light as she stepped forward. That alone was enough to make the lively voices of the soldiers fall abruptly silent. I almost felt I could hear them

readying their ears.

I'd long since been desensitized to it, but to other members of our feudal society, there was something special about being in the presence of a princess. The effect was the same for both the citizens of Shiyalta and those of Kilhina. Princesses generally confined themselves to their castles, but this one was actually here to congratulate the soldiers on their bravery.

Some of the boys and young men there might've ended up becoming the sort of men who learned the realities of politics and found themselves forced to betray their loyalty to Carol in order to serve their own families. If that happened, their feelings for her might change. But for now, the world was still a fair place in their eyes.

"First, allow me to express my appreciation to all of you. It's through your valiant efforts that the lives of everyone in this town have been saved, and mine too. Each of you fought bravely. I'd also like to offer my prayers to the fourteen souls that were sadly lost on the battlefield today." Carol closed her eyes and hung her head for a moment. It was a small gesture, but the effect was dramatic.

She glanced at the small table by the side of the bonfire. On it were fourteen cups containing the same drink that everyone else was holding. No one would enjoy those today—they were offerings for the dead.

Out of the fallen soldiers, two of them had been from the original fifty-six expedition members. It would be my duty to inform their parents of their deaths.

Carol closed her eyes once more. As everyone hung their heads, I closed my eyes too. A while later, I looked up again and saw that Carol was still in silent prayer. I didn't have to wait long, because she raised her head shortly after.

"Today, you have saved ten thousand innocent civilians and defended your princess. There isn't a single person across the whole of this peninsula who can speak ill of your efforts now. Your actions on this day have been the deeds of honorable knights." Carol paused for a breath, then exclaimed, "Be proud! You've earned that right! What's more... After cheering for victory, a soldier should have some time to rest. Now, if you'll join me in a toast!"

Good. It was starting to feel a little overblown.

When Carol raised the cup she was holding, everyone mimicked the gesture.

“To our victory!”

All at once, three hundred voices echoed, “To our victory!”

Though we didn’t have much food and drink to go around, the celebration was a lively one because the excitement of the battle was still fresh.

The gathering was alive with tales of heroism as the young men chatted with the allies they’d brandished spears alongside, or exchanged accounts of the fights that had happened on opposite sides of the battlefield.

Someone was already red-faced from the drink they’d raised during the toast, suggesting a low alcohol tolerance.

It was a good night.

I sat on a chair and simply watched everyone from a short distance away.

Myalo came over after spotting me sitting on the sidelines. “What’s wrong? Not in the mood?”

I glanced at her and noticed that she’d removed her military uniform, including the chain mail, and was instead dressed in civilian’s clothing. The outfit really made her look like an ordinary boy. Maybe that sounded rude, but she was wearing men’s clothing. I couldn’t help but see her that way.

“No, just thinking that it looks like they’re all having fun,” I said as my gaze returned to the bonfire.

“Well of course they are—we won.”

“But there are people missing.” *Fourteen of them.*

“That’s what you’re thinking about?”

“Yes.”

Myalo seemed to guess how I felt, and her voice became a gentle whisper. “We knew there’d be losses from the moment the war began.”

“I know. It was bound to happen.”

Trying to fight a war without any losses was like trying to drive a coach without wearing down the wheels. No matter how favorable it looked when we compared our deaths to those of the enemy, nothing would change the fact that any war between people would entail sacrifices. There was never war without death. I knew I’d lose people.

“I’m just brooding over it a little,” I told her.

“The living need to rest too.”

It sounded as though she thought I was judging the others for enjoying themselves—as if I wanted us to mourn the dead instead of celebrating our victory.

“I understand that. The soldiers worked hard. They deserve to enjoy their victory.”

I didn’t have a problem with the celebration. I hadn’t given everyone permission to enjoy themselves simply because others had convinced me it was necessary—it had actually been my own idea. I’d made sure people would have a good time tonight. I knew it was necessary to celebrate winning. Otherwise there wouldn’t be a reward waiting for the soldiers who’d risked their lives. It would’ve made victory a hollow thing with the atmosphere of a funeral.

“I meant *you*, Yuri,” Myalo retorted. “You’ve worked so hard and taken so much on yourself. I think now’s the time for you to be carefree.”

I’m the one who deserves rest?

“Well... I don’t know.”

The dead would’ve still been with us if we hadn’t fought. When I looked at it that way, I couldn’t help but dwell on it.

Then again, if we hadn’t fought, many of the civilians who were now sleeping in the village would’ve paid the price instead. There would’ve been a hundred—if not a thousand—times more casualties.

But deaths weren’t merely statistics for analysis—each person we’d lost had lived their own life and had possessed their own story. And yet, each one of

those lives had reached its conclusion through a decision that I'd made.

If things had gone slightly differently, they would've been here around the bonfire, drinking and sharing tales of our victory. There was no fundamental difference between them and the people I was watching celebrate.

But despite all that, I didn't find myself regretting the choices I'd made. It was a strange feeling. If an incident had resulted in deaths during my work with Ho Company, I'd carry the regret—and the responsibility. I would've come up with measures to ensure that it never happened again.

But even though people had died today, I was doing no such thing. I didn't have any regrets and didn't face any blame; if anything, I actually thought I'd done well.

"How am I going to take responsibility for this?" I asked softly.

"Hm...?" Myalo studied my face like she hadn't understood what I'd said. "There was a clause about that in the terms we set out while recruiting the members. I believe it said you'd bear no responsibility."

Yeah, there was that, but...

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what...? Compensation?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"Well, I'm sure you can guarantee that there'll be monetary compensation for the families of our two deceased unit members. As I've informed you already, neither was heir to their family's headship, so their deaths won't result in any disputes about succession."

"I know that. You don't have to tell me twice."

"Well, I'm not sure what else compensation for the deceased would mean." Myalo sounded puzzled. Perhaps she'd expected me to simply take all of this in stride.

"Yes... You're right."

"And...the dead can't speak for themselves. If we wanted to do something for

them...we wouldn't know what they'd want. It's difficult." Myalo didn't talk like she was making fun of me—she was giving the matter genuine thought. "There are various theories about where souls go. Some say they simply cease to exist at the moment of death."

The Shanti's views on spiritual matters were more like mythology than religion. There wasn't a single universally accepted idea about what happened after death. It all felt very vague.

Ancient beliefs said that souls returned to the bottom of the Sacred Pond to reenter the cycle of death and rebirth. The Sacred Pond was essentially the Black Sea, a holy site that the Shantila Empire's capital once stood alongside. But now that our people had been separated from the site for so long, new beliefs about a heavenlike afterlife were beginning to take root.

"We could hold some sort of memorial ceremony for them," she suggested, "but it would be a little self-serving to say it was for the benefit of the dead."

Since the dead couldn't offer up their own views, anything we did would feel like an attempt to comfort ourselves, rather than actual repayment for their sacrifice. But I still wanted to do *something*. I wanted to acknowledge their honor, tell their families they'd fought bravely, and ensure their surviving relatives would live comfortably.

Carol's silent prayer a short while ago had felt like a good start. It hadn't just been an empty gesture. If the spirits of the dead still held some awareness, then I felt her prayer might've brought them some consolation. Still, I wanted to do something for them myself.

"Though it's not just the deceased who are hard to compensate. Even at the Knight Academy, someone occasionally breaks a bone or loses a limb in an accident. No matter what compensation is offered, money and apologies won't give them back what they've lost. Their lives are ruined, and some of the more pessimistic students choose to end theirs. It's sad when someone suffers a loss. There's nothing that can put things right, but sometimes that's just the way things are."

"I guess so... Some people here are wounded pretty badly."

I'd lost count of how many of us had cuts and arrow wounds. Most had been

treated, but some of them might've had severed nerves beneath the bandages that would prevent their hands from ever fully healing. There was also a chance that some would develop complications like tetanus and ultimately die. There wasn't a single thing I could do for those people.

"Ah... No, that's not what I meant. I was trying to say that you shouldn't feel the need to fix everything."

"Oh, I get you."

I didn't feel such a heavy sense of responsibility anyway. Everything Myalo was saying was logical. I was just letting my first experiences in battle get to me. Much like the feeling of drunkenness that came when drinking alcohol for the first time, it was off-putting at first, but perhaps I'd get used to it. I expected that I would, though I didn't know if I'd ever enjoy it.

"I'm...not much use, am I?" Myalo muttered.

How so?

"I'm sure the dead are right here with us, drinking and having a good time," she said. "If I wanted to cheer you up, I should've said something like that, shouldn't I?"

Is she serious? That's meant to cheer me up? I couldn't help but laugh.

"That kind of talk just makes me feel awkward. I preferred the other things you said."

"Oh, I see..."

"And I'm not upset, to be honest. If I had to do it all over again..."

What would I be doing over? Oh, that's right.

"If I had to fight the same battle again...I'd just do the same thing, though maybe a little better. So don't worry about me."

"All right. But let me be by your side when you fight next... And right now."

Is that really what she wants?

"I won't stop you," I replied.



Interlude — Ange's March

Ange was headed home like a wounded wolf.

The locals called this road Reindeer Highway. It was so called because the people further north along this road kept reindeer that grazed outdoors. She'd read about it in a book written in Shanish, sold to her for next to nothing after being plundered. It was a guidebook for travelers that included the names of towns and tourist spots in the region.

What was the title...? Her mind was so foggy that she couldn't remember it. Ange simply gave up trying.

"Princess, please board a cart," Gustave urged for the umpteenth time.

"Stop saying that. I'll persevere to the end."

The horses pulling their wagons were close to the limit of exhaustion. Even the people who'd normally sit on the wagons to steer them were instead on the ground leading the horses by their reins. Although Ange, being a woman, weighed less than the others, she'd still be an extra burden.

And if she was the only one to board a wagon, it wouldn't bring her any comfort. This whole situation was a problem of her own making.

Four days prior, Ange had been dumbfounded as she'd looked to the opposite side of the ruined bridge.

The central four-fifths of the bridge had collapsed. Smoke filled the air, and it carried the smell of burned gunpowder.

"If you'd acknowledge me as the victor in my first battle, I'd consider it the greatest praise!"

Someone on the other side of the wreckage—apparently, Yuri Ho—was giving a speech.

Ange had lost. It felt like they'd been under a spell from the moment they'd

learned the bridge was intact, but now their defeat felt like something much more tangible.

We should've won.

Ange's side had correctly judged the strength and capabilities of their enemy, and they'd been right to think that victory was possible. In other words, it wasn't that they'd lost before the battle had even begun. Or maybe they had...

If victory would've meant obtaining a Shanti princess, then when two princesses had been put on show for the scouts to see, it had been a ploy to incite their greed. And if the princesses had been taken away the moment the scouts had left, then there'd never been so much as a million-to-one chance of Ange's side winning.

We've actually lost.

From start to finish, they'd walked right into the trap set by Yuri Ho.

"I pray for your safe return home!"

After having achieved a series of victories, Yuri Ho delivered his speech flawlessly—his Kulatish was impeccable. He was standing at the cliff edge facing directly at Ange's forces, with the people he'd protected behind him.

A hero... The word flashed through Ange's mind. That was the word for someone who overcame trials during times of trouble, led civilians and soldiers home, and joined the rear guard until everyone else was safe.

While it wasn't ideal for a commanding officer to be the last off the battlefield, it certainly looked heroic in Ange's eyes. Even as her heart filled with anger and resentment, she couldn't deny a sense of admiration and envy. A childish sense of ambition filled her heart.

I'll surpass him. I'll surpass that man and be the greatest ruler that ever was.

"Does no one have a bow?! Come to the front and shoot him!" Epitaph cried, clearly enraged.

A man with a bow, who just happened to be nearest Epitaph, stepped forward from the crowd.

"Shoot him dead!" Epitaph ordered as the man reached the precipice.

The soldier quickly drew his bow and fired. With a *woosh*, the arrow took flight. It followed a graceful curve as it approached Yuri Ho.

Yuri Ho didn't even flinch—he simply twisted his upper body to the side. Standing at that angle meant that his chest and abdomen were mostly hidden. His shoulder and arm shielded most of his body, so anything less than a direct hit to the head would've been unlikely to kill him. It was a common way for someone to protect themselves during a duel. It would have been reasonable for him to panic in this situation, but he didn't.

Regardless, it didn't even matter how calm his decision-making had been. Before the arrow could reach Yuri Ho, the gigantic man beside him knocked it out of the air with his spear. He looked like the same man who'd been fighting fiercely on the bridge a short while ago, though Ange couldn't be sure. She hadn't been at the front, so she'd lacked a good view of the combat.

Now that the surprise attack had been thwarted, Yuri Ho readied his gun and aimed it toward them. Ange remembered being shot in the head during the battle. Yuri Ho was a skilled marksman.

"Look out! Protect Lord Epitaph!" she yelled without a second thought.

"Leave me be! There's no need," Epitaph protested.

Ange's mind went blank.

"A bullet fired by a demon couldn't possibly hit me," Epitaph claimed inexplicably.

Yuri Ho took his time to aim, then he fired.

The strange sound of gunfire echoed throughout the valley as the bullet flew over the river and passed straight through Epitaph...or so it appeared.

In reality, the bullet had merely given Epitaph a shallow wound where it had grazed his cheek before hitting the face of a knight who'd been trying to protect him. The knight fell to the ground without so much as raising a cry.

Epitaph reacted like it was nothing. "What did I tell you? We are blessed with God's protection."

Does he think he won just now...?

Ange had always considered herself forsaken by God. Whether it was fortune or misfortune, the clergy would declare it God's will while claiming to be His representative. If fate or destiny was what drove the events of this world, then God wasn't on her side. God took no part in human affairs—He hadn't done anything for her, nor had He reached out to influence anything. She knew that He couldn't be relied on. The circumstances of her father's death proved it—after he'd lived a life according to God's will, her father had died in an incredible instance of bad luck.

Then again, Epitaph's talk of God's protection could've been a hollow lie designed to embolden the soldiers. Ange couldn't be sure.

"Now, let's head back the way we came. The ships are waiting for us," Epitaph said.

That had been how the battle concluded.

"In that case, I'd like to take charge of the rear guard," Ange quickly said, securing herself a place at the back of the group.

Since there was virtually no chance of anyone pursuing them from behind, there was no risk associated with the position. Being one of the last to board a ship would place her in a little danger, but a nagging sense of foreboding made her want to stay behind the others. When a task got off to a bad start, things often failed to improve with time. When initial expectations were off, the repercussions could ripple through everything that came after. This felt like one of those situations.

Ange's premonition would come to fruition that same evening.

"Our soldiers are engaging with a powerful enemy force up ahead. I'm here to deliver a request for reinforcements, Lady Angelica."

As the messenger from the Volunteer Knight Order delivered this request, Ange felt that a crisis was developing around her. But at the same time, she accepted it, simply thinking, *I knew this would happen.*

Their operation required an advance deep into enemy territory. It had been based on the assumption that no enemy reinforcements would appear. That

hadn't been a baseless guess—the enemy soldiers had fled from an earlier defeat, so they were unlikely to initiate the battle themselves. Epitaph had shared this reasoning with Ange, and she'd agreed. And yet, the enemy had come to them. There wasn't much point in reevaluating the decision in hindsight, but it was obvious that they'd been overly optimistic.

“Understood. Return to your post.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Ange waited until the messenger was far enough away before she spoke again.

“Have all forces withdraw.”

The moment she spoke this order, she felt it was contradictory. They were already in the process of withdrawing, and now she was ordering the same thing again. A withdrawal would usually mean continuing in the same direction that they were already moving.

“Have all troops turn around and go back the way we came,” she clarified.

“Yes, Ma'am!” her aide, Gustave, replied. “But...”

“I saw cavalry behind us. We have to give chase,” Ange said clearly.

“Are you quite sure...?”

“I saw cavalry. Do you understand me?”

No army could taste defeat without the loss of morale afterward. The same was true of the Volunteer Knight Order, despite all their pledges before God. No matter how well-trained and practiced they were, they were still human. They weren't like the skeleton army commanded by Usiris, the mythical King of the Dead. These soldiers had feelings and could complain. As long as an individual soldier had their own will, they could fall into a state of fear. Tireless training and a strong sense of pride prevented the army from showing signs of collapse, but morale was definitely running low. To make matters worse, there wasn't enough feed for the horses, and the soldiers were going hungry too.

In other words, they were in no condition to fight.

Gustave went along with it. “Yes, I saw it too. We need to pursue them.”

“I’ll find out what’s happening at the front,” Ange said.

“Princess,” Gustave chided.

“Order the withdrawal,” Ange insisted. “I’ll follow soon after you.”

“Princess! It’s dangerous!”

“I acknowledge that. I can’t decide how to handle this without seeing the enemy’s forces. I also need to see what Lord Epitaph’s doing.”

The severity of the situation depended on the enemy. In a worst-case scenario, the roads might become too dangerous to use while withdrawing from the area. The Volunteer Knight Order was unlikely to be defeated easily, but if it was, Ange would need another means of escape. It would be the greatest irony—they’d be forced to scatter and make their way back through the forest, just like Yuri Ho had done before.

“Very well,” Gustave agreed. “I will take command in your place. Please take care.”

“I will. I’m just taking a look,” Ange said before riding off.

“Lord Epitaph!”

As Ange forced her way past the soldiers of the Volunteer Knight Order, Epitaph looked at her from atop his horse.

“Lady Angelica! What happened?”

“I’ve come to view the situation for myself!”

“I see.”

For a moment there was disappointment in Epitaph’s eyes, then he looked away.

What was that?

“Then the demons won’t stop?” Epitaph asked a lone knight that kneeled in front of him.

“No... I think that’s unlikely,” he replied.

Ange had seen the knight before. He was the captain of a troop from the three hundred knights that Ange had borrowed.

“Why not? Tell me your reasoning.”

“My reasoning...” The knight looked at Epitaph in stunned silence for a moment. “It pains me to say so, but the situation simply isn’t in our favor! I implore you, War Minister Epitaph, turn back now or your life will be in danger!”

Ange could guess the state of the battle now. The lines of soldiers were probably holding as a result of incredible discipline, despite the overwhelming strength of the enemy.

Their failure wasn’t simply a result of low morale—they lacked proper equipment. Their soldiers were lightly equipped—they’d left their metal armor on the ships for the sake of a faster march. Though they were still holding out, their current situation would’ve probably made any ordinary unit fall into a disorderly rout.

“Sir Falente!” Ange addressed the knight by name. “Are the enemy attacking us on their birds?!”

“Yes. The enemy soldiers are all mounted! We’re fortunate that they can’t easily overwhelm us on the narrow road, but we’re facing an incredibly well-trained unit that—”

“Understood!” Ange cut him off. “Lord Epitaph, we must withdraw immediately! Have your soldiers regroup at once so—”

“Silence!” Epitaph yelled at Ange, wearing an expression she’d never seen from him. The corners of his mouth twisted down as he ground his teeth, and his eyes had the intensity of a glare.

Ange couldn’t say anything more. It’d be foolish to argue with him now. The members of the Volunteer Knight Order must’ve shared a similar sentiment, because they remained silent as well. Despite being in the middle of a crisis, the officers gathered around Epitaph remained eerily still, and around thirty seconds passed before anyone spoke again.

“We’re withdrawing,” Epitaph said clearly. “Lady Angelica, you must have

another route in mind, since you made the suggestion.”

“It will be a long journey, but yes,” Ange replied.

“Falente, remain here with your troop and hold back the enemy until not a single one of your men remains standing,” Epitaph said calmly.

For a moment Ange’s thoughts came to a stop. She was dumbfounded. Then she couldn’t help but argue. “Lord Epitaph! You can’t possibly...!”

Epitaph had just ordered the men to sacrifice themselves. They’d put up a fatal—no, *suicidal* was the right word—resistance so that the rest of Epitaph’s forces might live.

No ordinary army would’ve followed such an order. No matter how difficult the withdrawal, the rear guard was never left to die. The very reason men fought was because they believed that rewards and glory awaited them if they survived. Orders to sacrifice themselves were intolerable to officers and foot soldiers alike.

Commanding officers often found themselves in situations where it suited them to treat their soldiers like pawns, but such behavior made no sense in practice. Their soldiers would either reject the order, or they’d pretend to obey while looking for a chance to desert.

Unless their loyalty to their nation and their ruler was stronger than their will to live, such orders would simply sound like, “Kill yourself.” Soldiers would naturally flee. When had an apprentice ever committed suicide simply because their master told them to?

But the Volunteer Knight Order under Epitaph’s command was motivated by faith and family honor. It wasn’t just their confidence in Epitaph that made them obedient. It broke Ange’s heart to see a dazzling display of loyalty and devotion squandered this way.

“Then take Orphan’s troop with you too,” Epitaph added. “I believe all forty of them are completely uninjured. Fight well.”

“Grr...” Ange ground her teeth. She hadn’t gotten through to him.

Falente hesitated for a while, then said, “Yes, Sir. The thirty-two members of

my troop will combine with theirs and take on this task together.”

“Fight well.” Epitaph repeated the same line before turning his horse around and bidding it to advance toward the front.

Ange guessed he was headed there to tell the other soldiers to withdraw. It wasn’t the response Falente deserved for his selfless display of devotion.

“Sir Falente!” Ange called to the knight and rode closer as he was gathering the men placed under his command. Despite the urgency of their situation, she couldn’t leave without saying anything. “I’m not sure what to tell you...”

“None of us would be here if we weren’t willing to die for the cause.” Falente sounded undaunted.

“But...”

“It’s fine. I’m sure the fatherland will do well by our families, though I do feel terrible for the young ones yet to marry.”

“If only I’d tried harder to oppose him...”

“It’s better that you didn’t. Who knows how he might’ve reacted.”

As the knight spoke in her defense, Ange felt something like a splinter in her heart.

Did I oppose him? Ange asked herself. I argued, but was I trying to oppose him? No, I never considered defying him. I only spoke out. I owe this man sincerity, not empty words.

“I’m sorry. I-I wasn’t trying to oppose him. I was only objecting to Sir Epitaph’s plan... Though it is rational.”

As heartless as Epitaph’s decision had been, it was the most effective course of action available. Ange acknowledged that. While Epitaph’s behavior had seemed inhuman, somewhere deep down, Ange was ready to accept his choice with open arms.

“I see...” Falente looked at her with a sorrowful smile. “It’s good that there are those who value the life of an officer.”

Falente must have sensed something in Ange’s attitude, because he said the

words with heavy emotion.

Value? Do I value him? Have I really done enough that I can claim that?

“Sir Falente, I...”

“You’ve said enough.” Falente raised his right hand slightly, signaling the end of their conversation. He seemed disinterested in hearing more.

Ange gripped his right hand and shook it firmly. “I will never forget what you’ve done for us... I’ll remember you my entire life.”

“Yes, Ma’am. May we meet in Para in the underworld.”

“Of course.”

“Please live on,” Falente said. “You shouldn’t throw your life away here. Farewell.” Falente turned back to the members of his troop.

All Ange could do was watch him walk away.



Five days had passed since they’d begun to withdraw eastward.

Although Ange’s feet felt as heavy as lead, she walked with her head held high. Most of the blisters on her feet had burst, and although the wet feeling bothered her at first, that was now masked by the intense pain they caused her. But even so, each step gave her increased hope.

The Volunteer Knight Order, under Epitaph’s command, followed behind her. They’d originally started with a thousand men, but now they were little more than one hundred. After soldiers had been made to sacrifice themselves in one battle after another, their army was thoroughly worn down.

All of the fallen had been slaughtered by enemy cavalry. But, for better or worse, the pursuit had stopped after a few days. Ange believed it was because the enemy’s supply line had been stretched to the limit. She and the soldiers had also likely passed the range of their enemy’s mounted eagles, so enemy scouts couldn’t determine their remaining strength. If they were to find out that only a force of 150 or so remained, they might’ve continued with a relentless attack. It might’ve resulted in a better future for the nations of Yeesusdom if they had.

Ange's feet fell heavily to the ground with each labored step. Her feet sent jolts of pain through her legs, as if her body was crying out to its master for an end to this punishing treatment. Her stomach was empty. Walking despite her lack of nourishment was draining her of her mental energy. It felt as though she was gradually turning into a hunk of dried meat. Though her mind was hazy, she was able to handle the periodic jolts of pain calmly. She wasn't about to show weakness to the soldiers around her. That thought alone was enough motivation to keep her head held high.

"Lady Ange," one of the soldiers called to her.

The soldiers were managing to address her correctly. They must've known that this wasn't the time to test her patience.

"What?"

"I've been informed that there are two captured civilians up ahead."

"All right. Let's go see them."

"Please board a wagon first."

For a moment, Ange scowled. She didn't want to board a wagon.

"Lady Ange... Forgive my rudeness, but you'll command less respect on foot."

It sounded like an excuse to get her onto a wagon for the sake of her health, but the reasoning made it harder to argue. Leaving her own unit while she caught up with the soldiers in front would mean walking even faster than she had up to now—she'd have to run, in fact. That wasn't possible, given the condition of her feet.

"All right," she finally replied.

"Then you agree?! I'll have a cart take you there right away."

The knight was about twenty-three, which made him older than Ange. He wasn't exactly overflowing with energy, but he didn't appear to be suffering either as he ran off to call for a cart. He'd trained far harder than Ange, whose every step hurt because the skin on her feet was cracking. She regularly took command during training sessions, but didn't participate in them herself.

I'll get myself in better shape once I'm home, she decided.

She was soon taken to a wagon, and she made a show of leaping onto it without having it stop for her.

"Go quickly," she ordered.

"Yes, Ma'am!"

As they began to travel a little faster than the column of soldiers around them, Ange was soon left with nothing to do.

After they'd eaten some winter food stocks found in a village the day before, the horses were still healthy. A slender woman without armor wasn't a significant burden compared to the cargo that was already on the wagon.

The wagon rattled around as it traveled. She was moving onward without the constant pain now. It was so comfortable that it stirred some emotion. She'd never thought much of it before when she'd traveled this way, but now it felt like she'd discovered some groundbreaking new invention.

Ange worried she might get used to this comfort. Maybe it wouldn't matter if she did—her soldiers would forgive her. The thought made her feel like she was indulging in some sort of forbidden consolation, like scratching a wound she wasn't supposed to touch. Ange put the idea out of her mind, like a lantern's flame snuffed out with a single breath.

"Lady Ange, could that be them?" the knight holding the horse's reins asked.

Up ahead, one of her subordinates, who she'd sent ahead for the sake of reconnaissance, was coming back to them. With him were two long-eareds whose arms were bound with rope.

"Looks like it."

Once they were close enough, the wagon stopped so that Ange could get off. She looked at the two long-eareds. One was a woman in early middle age, and the other was still young enough to be called a girl. They looked emaciated and wary of Ange.

"What were you doing on this road?" Ange asked them in Shanish.

The older woman looked a little surprised. "We were trying to flee the

country.”

She spoke with intensity, like she was relieved to have found someone who could understand her.

I can imagine how she feels, Ange thought.

“Please, please have mercy on us...”

“Who’s the girl?”

“This is my daughter.”

A mother and child?

“Please, please spare my daughter’s life. I’m begging... I’m begging you...”

As she begged for mercy, the woman fell to her knees, put her bound arms in the dirt, and lowered her head.

The girl, who looked about ten, simply stood there with a bewildered expression. Eventually, the girl lowered her head too. “I beg you,” she said.

“Do you want to have this woman?” Ange asked her soldiers, switching to Kulatish.

She was letting them know that they could rape the woman if they wanted to. She didn’t normally allow such barbaric behavior, but the journey since their defeat had been tough, and her men needed some consolation. If it was enough to restore their spirits even a little, Ange would allow it.

The older woman had the well-proportioned features that were common of Shanti people, but she looked like she was in her forties. On top of that, she was fairly stocky with excess fat and muscle on her limbs, which suggested she was from a farming family. Ange was only eighteen. She couldn’t judge whether this was the sort of woman that soldiers, driven by their baser instincts, would want to force themselves on.

“Hmm...”

The two knights looked at each other. Ange didn’t know what they were thinking, but she could tell they were hesitant to answer.

“I don’t want her myself,” the first said.

"I don't want her either," the other agreed.

"You don't need to restrain yourselves. I have to ask first because I don't understand men's needs."

"I can't speak for all of the men here, but she looks a little past her prime to me," the first one said.

"The child is probably a little young... Hmm..." The second knight examined the girl. "No, she won't do."

Okay, then they're no use to us.

Ange had assumed the girl was far too young for anyone to have a sexual interest in her. She was surprised that the knight even needed to think about it. Ange's opinion of him had just fallen.

"I see. Well then, release them," Ange ordered her soldiers with a nod. She turned to the captives and added, "You can go, but we'll take your food. We're short on supplies. Consider yourself lucky my men didn't touch you."

The woman nodded her head, though she looked at Ange with resentment.

Ange was glad that the incident had ended without any cruelty. Perhaps it was her ability to speak Shanish that made her see these people differently. Although the Papal State declared them devils, to her, they all looked like ordinary humans.

"You've got round ears, miss," the young girl, perhaps not understanding the situation at all, said suddenly.

Ange wondered if the girl had mistaken her for a member of the same species since they spoke the same language. She replied, "Yes, I do."

"You're the cutest woman I've ever seen."

"Am I?"

Ange was used to having her appearance complimented, but it was the first time a Shanti had called her cute. In other circumstances, she might've paid the girl a compliment in return, but she didn't. It felt odd to show consideration to a member of the species whose land she was taking in this war.

“Go,” Ange told them. “A little further down the road, the army that’s following us might offer you some help.”

“Y-Yes, Ma’am... Goodbye.”

The older woman nervously took some valuables out of her belongings, but left the rest on the ground. Then she walked off the way Ange had come, keeping her daughter close by.

“Yunie, go with them. Tell the men behind us not to arrest them again.”

“Ah... Yes, Ma’am.” The knight, who’d been a scout up to now, agreed. He followed after the mother and daughter, looking more like a wolf stalking its prey than a gentleman escorting them.

The main body of their forces had been catching up while they were stopped, so they were already in view further down the road.

Ange sat down on the step of the wagon she’d been riding and sighed. “Phew.”

Her thinking was sluggish, and she had some lingering doubts over whether the good deed she’d just done for the mother and daughter was worth anything at all, but she soon stopped ruminating on it.



“Addy Ange!”

Ange was walking when she heard an odd voice—it sounded like someone with a stuffy nose—calling to her from behind.

“Hm?”

She turned around to see a knight with a swollen face. It was Yunie, large blue bruises covering his eyes and nose. He kept having to wipe his nose with a handkerchief that had been stained red from all the dripping blood. He’d clearly been punched.

“Yunie, what happened to you? Don’t tell me...” Ange trailed off.

She would’ve been shocked, but the conclusion she’d formed was so obvious it felt trivial. Any fool would’ve known that such an outcome was possible. She

couldn't be surprised by something that even a child could've seen coming. She'd thought that her mind had been clear, but now she was surprised at herself for having so little foresight.

Yunie put the bloody handkerchief to his nose and blew hard in an attempt to clear it.

"I'm so sorry! They were both taken by the Volunteer Knight Order!"

Ange hurried to the scene by horse, but by the time she got there, it was far too late.

There were two corpses. The bodies were hanging in separate trees, facing each other, and both were in the same condition. They'd been stripped naked, and their bodies were in such a tattered state that it looked like they'd been clawed to death by wild beasts. Their intestines had spilled out from their open stomachs and reached to the ground at their feet. Their skin still looked soft, and their eyes were still open. If it weren't for the state of their bodies, it would seem like both the mother and child were still alive. But no—they'd been tortured to death.

Ange looked at the body of the child she'd spoken with just a short while ago and felt a wave of nausea. She put her hand to her mouth to stop herself vomiting. "Ugh..."

"Oh, Lady Angelica? What brings you here?"

Epitaph was nearby. He'd actually chosen to rest here while he admired the horrific scene.

"Why would you...?" Ange began.

"Your soldier? I'm sorry about him, but he was speaking such nonsense. Something about ensuring the safety of the demons."

"Yes, those were my orders. It was my mistake."

It was shameful that she'd failed to realize something so obvious. She understood now that she should've told the pair to hide in the forest and wait for all of the soldiers to pass. They would've been far safer than with her escort.

She'd completely neglected to consider what would happen when they encountered the Volunteer Knight Order along the road.

Epitaph still didn't understand. "You should've instructed him more clearly. But, oh well, these things do happen."

"No, that's not it. I wanted them to escape unharmed. My mistake was that I forgot that they'd run into you."

"You aren't seriously telling me you were letting them live?"

"Yes, I am. But then your men beat up my knight and killed the women he was escorting."

Epitaph looked unsure how to respond. "Oh dear. You're empathizing with these demons too much, Lady Angelica."

"I'm no demon sympathizer. I just don't like pointless acts of barbarism."

"Pointless'...? Acts like this are an important lesson."

"If you recognize that they can be taught, then you must know that they have minds of their own. And yet, you show them no mercy. You're cruel to an extreme."

Ange remembered the acts of violence she'd seen from Epitaph during their journey. As an act of revenge for the battle they'd lost, he'd cut up the body of enemy soldiers. Even now, he was still wearing their body parts like jewelry. That wasn't even the worst instance. The soldiers had already been dead when Epitaph had hacked apart their bodies, so they hadn't felt any pain. The same probably couldn't be said for these women.

"You left young soldiers hanging for your own amusement. The reason the enemy attacked us with such ferocity is because the sight enraged them. How many men must we lose so that you can amuse yourself?"

"But you must see that the enemy has decided not to pursue us further?"

"I don't just mean right now—I mean your conduct throughout this entire war."

"Conduct...? There's no proper conduct in war."

Even after she'd explained it clearly, Epitaph still didn't understand her.

"Because of the things you've done, we won't be able to complain if the tables turn and we're the ones being eradicated. If the enemy invades our lands and begins to slaughter innocent civilians, we'll have no right to beg for mercy."

"Lady Angelica, in other circumstances, you'd be tried for heresy over such statements. In any case, the crusades began because humans and demons fought one another for survival. It's only inevitable that one race will eradicate the other."

Ange was filled with the same sense of resignation that she'd felt several times in the past few days. *Arguing with him is pointless—my words never get through to him. Something's wrong with him. He's too closed-minded.*

"Indeed. But my men will give these two a burial. If the enemy sees them in this state, it could make our current crisis even worse. I won't allow that," she stated.

Ange had invented an excuse. In truth, she felt obligated to give the two a proper burial after she'd spoken with them a little earlier.

There was a hint of displeasure in Epitaph's eyes as he spoke. "Very well. Do as you will."

Ange was aboard a wagon when Gustave reported to her.

"Lady Ange, I have a report from the scouts. We've discovered a village."

"I see. We'll sleep in that village tonight. How many houses are there?"

"Five..."

"I see." Ange hid her disappointment.

Since there weren't any large roads that people could've used to escape in this area, they hadn't taken the food with them when they'd left. However, there were barely any homes here, and provisions were scarce.

Summer was beginning, so it wasn't too cold at the moment, but it was clear everything had frozen over the winter. The climate must've been too cold for much hunting or farming here, or perhaps the majority of people lived as

nomads rather than having fixed residences. Ange didn't know the reason. Regardless, it was a fact that very few dwellings existed nearby.

Although only about 150 soldiers remained, what little amount of food remained in five houses—particularly after it had been consumed through the winter—wouldn't be enough to feed them all.

It was possible to gain some extra provisions by having the archers hunt with their bows, but having so many elite soldiers here actually caused problems. Since there wasn't a single conscript with them, the only hunting these soldiers had ever experienced was firing arrows on foxes while dogs hounded them. Hunting wild game in unfamiliar territory turned out to be a much greater challenge.

"Lady Ange, you've given up walking?" Gustave sounded slightly pleased. He must've been glad to see her sitting in a wagon rather than stubbornly walking on her aching feet.

"Yes, I gave up."

"Do you mind if I ask what made you change your mind?"

"I made a poor decision today. I was too proud to stop walking, and it left me so exhausted I couldn't think. As your leader, my priority should be to retain clarity of mind at all times. I've realized that forcing myself to keep walking isn't part of my job."

"That's a splendid lesson. I must say I'm moved by it." Gustave took off his helmet and lowered his head.

Ange wasn't quite as impressed by her own reasoning—she simply felt disappointed in herself. She'd thought herself incredibly wise, but now she wasn't so sure. And if she *did* turn out to be incompetent, then she had to at least be agreeable. Unfortunately, she'd been picking fights. No good would come of opposing the Papal State here. She should've had better control over her emotions.

"I'm sure you've lost interest in serving me. When it's all over, you may leave," she said.

"What?"

“Now you’ve seen that there’s nothing impressive about me.”

Gustave laughed the moment Ange finished speaking. “Hah. That’s a common way for young people to react to a setback.”

“I suppose so.”

It hadn’t felt like a personal setback, but when he described it that way, it made sense.

“Might I say something a little blunt?” Gustave asked.

“Say what you will.”

“We never had particularly high expectations for judgments made by an eighteen-year-old girl.” Gustave spoke with a gentle tone despite his harsh words.

“Really?”

“Has there ever been a leader who acts with Godlike wisdom at such a young age?”

Ange wasn’t sure. It was a tough question. She’d never even heard of anyone who’d fought numerous battles by the age of eighteen.

“You’re young, Lady Ange—it’s a given that you have more to learn. Everyone understands this. What we anticipate from you is growth. We know that you’ll become a great commander and ruler based on the lessons you’ve learned here. That’s the very reason we’re with you. If it were any other way, none of us would put our lives in the hands of a girl so much younger than us.”

Ange couldn’t think of a response. She felt moved, but she told herself that she mustn’t cry.

There were a few of her subordinates who’d served during her father’s reign, but many of them were raised by people who’d been close to her father. They followed Ange because they viewed her as their sovereign.

“You must excuse me, Lady Ange. I have business to attend to.” Gustave dropped back, disappearing from Ange’s view.

My followers show me more devotion than I deserve.

Ange felt that it was wasted on her. But perhaps, if she grew wiser like Gustave said she would, she'd become worthy of it. The question was whether she really had the potential to become such a leader.

I do. And if I don't, I'll act like I do. I'll work so hard that the act will become reality.

Angelica Sacramenta used her dirty hands to wipe away the tears that formed in the corners of her eyes.

Epilogue — Meanwhile in White Birch Dormitory

I woke up that day to an annoying clicking sound.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a faint orange light on the ceiling. It wasn't sunlight shining in through the window—the sun hadn't risen yet. It was the light of a lamp's flame.

I sat up in the top bunk bed and looked down. My roommate, Lilly, was sitting at her desk tinkering with a clock.

"You're still at it? You'll be tired in the morning."

"Yeah..."

Lilly wasn't putting together a new clock, nor was she doing maintenance work. She was simply taking a clock apart and putting it back together. She was keeping herself busy, but she might as well have been stacking stones and knocking them down again.

It was just over two weeks since we'd received news of Yuri's crash and subsequent disappearance. Lilly had been fretting ever since.

I climbed down the steps beside the bed, took the chair from my own desk—which was piled high with books—and moved it across the room so I could sit near Lilly.

I watched her for a while, but Lilly continued working with a blank expression on her face. She was normally capable of unbelievably precise movements with her tweezers, but the small pieces were continuously falling from her grasp. It didn't seem to irritate her, though, and she didn't make an effort to be more careful. She just kept working. Since her only aim was to keep her mind off certain things, it didn't really matter how skillfully she performed the task.

"I think you should stop," I said.

When I put my own hands over her fidgeting ones, she went completely still.

"I know, but it keeps me occupied."

“You were imagining bad things again, weren’t you? Everything’s fine. I just know Yuri will make it back.”

After several days of being unable to sleep properly, signs of heavy fatigue were visible on Lilly’s face. It was like she was awake, but her brain wasn’t. Her body and mind both needed rest, but her anxiety-stricken heart wouldn’t allow it.

“Sure he will,” Lilly agreed. “He’ll come back, no doubt.”

“So why not go to bed? We can sleep together.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Lilly’s smile was forced, but she got into the lower bed without arguing. I climbed into it with her. The bed was made for one, so it was a little cramped with both of us.

After I’d removed her glasses—she’d forgotten to remove them herself—I folded them up and put them on the narrow shelf beside her pillow. Then I wrapped my arms around her head.

“It’s all right. There’s nothing to worry about. Yuri promised us that he’d come home...” I whispered reassurances to her quietly enough that it wouldn’t stop her from falling asleep. “He’s probably arriving in Reforme right around now. Someone saw him climb a tree right after the crash, so I don’t think he was hurt.”

Lilly didn’t reply. I continued to give her encouragement with my quiet whispering. The task made me think of a calm descending on a body of water after an intense storm.

Unlike Lilly, I wasn’t particularly worried. Yuri would make it back no matter what situation he was in. Well, maybe not if he were to suddenly die because of a natural disaster—like being hit by a meteor or a bolt of lightning—but he’d been spotted alive after the crash. There was no way he’d die now. I wasn’t lying to Lilly when I said I was sure he was okay.

“Everything’s fine... It’s just taking him a while, that’s all. There’s nothing for us to worry about.”

I whispered similar things to her for a while, then her breathing told me that she was asleep.

I was sure that my complete confidence in Yuri would have a soothing effect on Lilly. Her anxiety had gotten so bad that it seemed like an illness, and sometimes I felt it infecting me too. But I wouldn't let myself worry, or else my words of reassurance would start to sound hollow. For that reason, I refused to fret.

As sleepiness crept up on me again, I reminded myself that I couldn't falter.

The next morning, I woke up at the usual time and lay sleepily in bed. The sight of an unfamiliar ceiling reminded me of what had happened during the night.

The sun would be up now. I twisted my body so I could check the current time on the wall clock. I didn't budge for another seven minutes, but after that, I put my palms firmly over Lilly's ears to block them. Another ten seconds passed, then a loud chiming sound filled the building's corridors. It was the wake-up alarm.

I waited for the bell to stop before I carefully removed my hands. Luckily, Lilly hadn't woken up—she was still sleeping with a peaceful look on her face. She was finally getting some good rest. If she were to wake up, she'd just go back to imagining awful things, so it was best not to disturb her. After lifting her slightly and sliding another pillow under her, I slipped out of bed.

I tried to make as little noise as possible while putting on my uniform.

I sat at my desk, picked up a pen, and wrote a note explaining that Lilly wouldn't be attending her few remaining lectures because she was ill. If I could put it into a particular mailbox in White Birch Dormitory by a certain time, someone would collect it and pass it on to the lecturers so that she wouldn't be punished for her absence.

Next, I quietly left and headed for the dining hall. After some light breakfast for myself, I showed the absence note to someone there so I could get some food for her. If sick people had to visit the dining hall, the illness would spread, so it was normal for them to eat in their rooms.

I briefly returned to the room to put Lilly's breakfast on her desk, then went to attend a lecture.

I was in a small lecture theater for Classical Logic III when I unexpectedly heard someone enter behind me. I turned and saw a mature student had walked into our class.

"She's in here," the intruder said while turning to someone out in the corridor.

It wasn't long before I learned who she was talking to. A blonde girl appeared in her place—it was Carla Flue Shaltl.

I'd never really spent time with her. In fact, I felt like I hadn't seen her in a long while. Ever since I'd gotten caught up in an argument between her and her sister on my first day in the dorm, I'd been doing my best to avoid her.

"You're Yuri's cousin, aren't you? I want to talk."

"But I'm in a lecture."

I really wasn't in the mood. This wasn't one of those classes where the students would just noisily talk to one another.

Classical Logic III, the final module of the logic course, was a difficult non-compulsory class. In other words, it wasn't needed in order to graduate. What's more, studying logic wouldn't result in any particular benefits for most people during their work or private life. For those reasons, there were fewer than ten students taking the class, and all of them had a genuine interest in logic. We were the eccentric ones—the students with strange tastes. In the small room where we'd gathered, we were working hard to make sense of everything the lecturer said. I liked this sort of atmosphere. It was one of the few lectures at the Cultural Academy where I actually felt I was learning things.

"It's urgent," Carla said.

Urgent...? Given the state of the world, she might've genuinely had something important to tell me. She was royalty, after all, and I didn't want to argue with her over it while I was in the middle of class.

“Very well,” I said with a sigh.

I got up from my seat and bowed. “I’m terribly sorry, but I need to step out for a moment.”

“Yes, go ahead,” the elderly lecturer said briefly, showing no real interest in me.

“I’m sorry for disturbing everyone,” I added before quickly walking out of the room.

In the corridor, Carla and her student flunkies were all silent. The flunkies seemed to be getting nervous. Given that I’d been asked to step outside to talk, this wasn’t the reception I’d anticipated.

“So...you wanted to tell me something?”

“It’s about Yuri... You haven’t heard anything, have you?” Her voice was solemn. It wasn’t the demanding, high-pitched shrieking I normally associated with her.

Two weeks had passed since the boy she claimed was her lover and the girl who was *actually* her sister had gone missing. It was no surprise to learn that she was beside herself with worry. I had to feel a little sorry for her, but it wasn’t enough to cancel out the annoyance I felt at having been dragged out like this.

“No, I haven’t. Is that all you wanted to ask?” I spoke firmly, unable to stop myself from sounding a little angry.

“You *really* haven’t heard anything?”

“I haven’t. Why did you come to me? Do you think Yuri is secretly sending me letters? It’s not like he ran away after an argument with his parents. When he does come back, it’ll be your mother who he contacts first, not me.”

“I did, of course, ask her first,” Carla said. “But she might be hiding things.”

Hiding things?

“Why would she need to hide good news?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but she might.”

That wasn’t the response I wanted. If Carla suspected her mother was keeping secrets, then her suspicions had to be based on something. I wanted to hear her reasoning or thought process.

“Does Her Majesty have a reason to hide things?” I asked.

Carla looked at me with a blank expression. “I don’t know.”

Now it made sense—the girl was an idiot. She probably didn’t understand what had happened to Yuri. The explanation would be too complicated for her, and she wouldn’t bother to ask questions about the parts that confused her. She didn’t want anyone to think that she lacked intelligence, so she covered up her lack of understanding by accusing others of hiding things or not explaining them properly.

I’d come to realize that people who couldn’t use their brains were actually quite common. People like her weren’t able to form logical conclusions even when all the facts were laid out before them. Her only option was to accept the opinions of others—and there were no shortages of those, given all the people around her. Now she was looking for someone who’d give her an opinion she liked the sound of—one that wouldn’t cause her any stress. She’d probably gone to her mother first and received nothing but harsh words, and now, after asking who-knows-how-many people, she’d come to me.

If Carol had died, then this girl would be our next queen. Yuri wouldn’t be the only one ready to give up on the kingdom if it came to that.

Well, if it’s reassuring words she wants, then there’s only one thing I can say.

“I haven’t heard anything, but I do believe he’s still alive. I don’t think there’s any cause for concern, because the situation is well within Yuri’s capabilities.” I told her what she wanted to hear.

“Right?! I knew it! I knew it!”

Clearly, I’d given her the right answer. Carla was positively beaming at me.

“Yes, indeed. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must return to the lecture. Please forgive me, but I need the course credits.”

I turned my back on her and returned to the lecture theater.

Sadly, the only factual information I'd shared with her was the bit about me needing more course credits. Though it wasn't this logic course that I was struggling with—it was all the compulsory courses.

When the logic lecture had ended and I'd finished the subsequent Regional Administration II lecture, I was finally free. I had to hurry back to my room. Lilly wasn't much of a handful when she was feeling down. I knew she wouldn't smash things or hurt herself if I left her alone. But still, I had to be quick.

I ran across a walkway that linked the central building to the Cultural Academy building and found an older female student standing by the window writing in a notebook.

When I tried to pass, she suddenly said my name. "Sham Ho?"

For a moment I came to a stunned halt. I soon began running again, though—I didn't have time to waste.

"Wait," she called to me.

I didn't stop. Then I heard her footsteps approaching me from behind.

She's going to be trouble, isn't she? It's just one thing after another today. I've been caught up in other people's problems enough already.

I sped up. I was a fairly good runner. My father's blood must have made me a natural-born athlete. A fellow Cultural Academy student wasn't going to best me.

"Wait up." I heard her voice right behind me, then she wrapped her arm around my waist and lifted me into the air. "Why are you running? I need to talk to you. It's important."

"Um... Do you want me to scream?"

She hadn't just caught up; she'd lifted me up effortlessly with one arm. None of the Cultural Academy students should've been capable of that. I was small, but I certainly wasn't a dog or a cat. Something wasn't right.

"None of that. You'll make a fuss. Now come with me."

She carried me into a nearby classroom and placed me down at the very back. I was positioned against the wall opposite the blackboard, but the girl remained close, her hands on either side of my body so I couldn't run away.

"Who even are you?" I demanded.

"Hm, that's a secret."

"Who are you? Tell me, or I'll scream."

The girl's face looked beautiful when viewed up close like this. And though her breasts weren't as big as Lilly's, they were still impressive.

"You're cute," she said. "I'll take a little taste."

She leaned in and brought her face close to mine. When I swiveled my head to dodge, her mouth moved toward my neck.

"Eek!" I shrieked.

She'd just licked my neck.

Her hand roved from its position at my hip and crept upward toward my chest, like she was feeling the shape of my body through my clothes. Meanwhile, she put her other hand between my knees and then slid it across my inner thigh, lifting my skirt in the process. Her hand got close to sensitive areas that no one was supposed to touch, and then she felt my butt through my underwear.

What's wrong with her?

"Would you please stop...?"

I pushed her shoulder firmly. Even though I used a lot of force, she didn't budge. But moving her wasn't my goal. While my hand on her shoulder had her attention, I used three fingers to grip the blade that had been sewn into the collar of my top. I pulled it loose, dropped to the ground with my palm against the floor, and stabbed the blade deep into her thigh... Or at least, I tried to do that.

She stopped me with the same hand that she'd used to touch my behind. The double-sided blade, which was only about as wide as my little finger, had been caught between her thumb and index finger, and she was gripping my hand

firmly so that I couldn't move.

"Didn't dither at all, did you? I'm impressed." The girl moved back slightly, then stroked my hair.

I was out of options—I'd have to scream. I took a deep breath.

"Hel—"

"Whoa, stop." The girl quickly covered my mouth with her hand.

"Mmmgh."

"Sorry, sorry. I'll cut it out, so please don't," she said while releasing my hand that held the blade.

She paused for a moment to see whether I'd try to stab her again, then took her hand away from my mouth.

"What in the world...?"

What's the big idea? I honestly don't get it.

There were plenty of girls here in White Birch who fell in love with other girls, so I always worried one might try to force themselves on me, but I never thought there'd be anyone here who'd react so calmly after I'd tried to stab them.

"I'm sorry. You're like a little animal; I just had to pet you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

There'd actually been several people who'd acted that way toward me, so I knew what she meant. Still, none of them had ever tried to touch me like that before.

"I'm a royal sword. I'm sure you've heard of us."

The girl put a hand behind her back, then drew a black dagger that served as a proof of identity. The black substance couldn't be embedded into the iron, of course, so the sharpened part of the blade still had a mirror-like metal finish. It must've been some sort of oxide film. I was curious to know how it had been created.

"Maybe I have. What do you want with me?"

“Her Majesty sent me to give you these.” The girl took out two envelopes from her pocket. “Here you go.”

I took them from her. “Thanks...”

“Now I have to go. See you.” The royal sword turned around and left the classroom.

I put my blade away under my clothes, taking care not to cut them, then returned to my dorm room.

“Lilly, are you still feeling down today?” I asked with a smile the moment I entered the room.

I was on top of the world. Rarely did I ever feel so happy; I could hardly contain myself.

“Hm?”

Lilly turned away from her desk to look at the strange joyous creature that had just entered the room.

“I knew it,” I said. “You’re moping again.”

“What’s up with you?”

“Oh, this and that.”

I walked behind Lilly’s chair and grabbed both of her breasts from behind.

Squish, squish, squish. They’re so soft. If they’d make a pillow out of this stuff, I’d definitely buy it, even if it cost half a year’s allowance.

“Hey, stop.”

“I’ll bet it’s tough having boobs this big,” I said, rubbing my chin against the back of her neck while continuing to massage her breasts.

“Sure is. You ought to know that already. Now, what’s gotten into you? You ain’t normally like this.”

She was so incredibly down that I was too energetic for her to handle. She forced a smile, like she didn’t know how else to react.

“Ain’t nothin’ gotten into me,” I replied. “I’m the same as I’ve ever been.”

“Have you been drinkin’?”

It’s not alcohol, but maybe she’s not so far off. This is just as intoxicating.

“No, I haven’t. But I’m proud of you for not using alcohol to run from your problems. You’re a good girl.”

I took one hand off Lilly’s breasts and patted her hair as I praised her. I really was proud of her.

“Yeah... You know how Yuri hates alcohol. Now, would you quit touchin’ my chest? Seriously, what’s gotten into you?”

“Come on, let me feel them a little more. I think I’ve earned the right. I’ve been sleeping next to you like I’m your mom. Kind of weird, right? Are you my little baby? You should’ve thought a little about all the embarrassing memories you’d be making.”



Lilly had nothing to say in response to that.

I continued to play with her breasts and enjoyed their softness the whole time. She'd normally grab my cheek whenever I tried this, so I figured I'd enjoy the chance while I had it.

"Yeah, I figured I was bein' a nuisance. Sorry. But I don't know what to do with myself..."

"Forget about all that. It's time to lighten up a little."

I took the two letters out from my pocket. One was addressed to "My Cousin Sham," and the other, "Her Roommate, Lilly." Each had been signed by Yuri Ho in the bottom right corner. Needless to say, Yuri couldn't have sent these unless he was still alive.

I held them out in front of Lilly's breasts.

"It's all okay now. See?"

I put the letters on the desk, then wrapped my arms around Lilly. I felt her shoulder trembling where it touched my chest. It wasn't long until my sleeve grew wet.

Afterword

My dear readers, it's been a while. Fudeorca here.

This work has now reached the fifth volume, and it's fair to say the story has reached a high point.

It's thanks to all of my readers that I've been able to keep the series going for so long. I do hope that you'll continue to enjoy it in the future.

This is, of course, the part of the story that I really wanted to write when I first started, but it took an awfully long time to get here.

This is what I'd always been aiming for, but if I'd jumped straight into the war scenes, people wouldn't be able to empathize with newly introduced characters. I might've been able to describe the war, but I wouldn't have been able to make the reader anxious about the characters' fates. Rather than the characters being new, they had to be familiar by that point, and everything relevant to the upcoming plot also had to be explained beforehand. Naturally, all of that buildup couldn't be too dry, so I had to make that part interesting too. All this is easy enough to say, but it was hard to do. I would've liked it to be shorter, but it seems five thick volumes were needed for someone with my current level of skill. I'd like to improve on that in the future.

The content of this fifth volume included a bombard.

A bombard is a type of large cannon with a size that presents several problems. Those come from the fact that iron has very different properties depending on whether it's cast iron or tempered iron.

Cast iron is iron that has been melted, poured into a mold, and cooled. A modern example of its use would be in the outer shell of a car's engine—the engine block. (Though some modern engines use aluminum instead.)

Engine blocks are fairly likely to be destroyed if the engine locks up while

driving. When it locks up, the fast-moving components inside come to a sudden stop, and the shock can be enough to break them. In particular, if a connecting rod snaps, it can move wildly and collide with the engine walls. That can easily be enough to cause a puncture. It should be possible to find pictures using Google, but the holes aren't like the bullet holes you'd see in a steel plate—they have a cross section that looks like a broken brick.

If we consider a cannon, it won't split open like an octopus hot dog as you'd often see in cartoons. Instead, it'll break apart like bricks being smashed into pieces. Cast iron is brittle at the best of times, so it's a poor choice considering that it has to absorb the shock from the explosion. Despite that, iron is the common choice of material for making cannons. In fact, the cannons used in the Second World War were made from iron (or more precisely, steel).

So how was that possible? Well, they were made by melting down the iron and then press-forging it. That produces a solid lump of iron, so a hole has to be made for the shell to be inserted into. Creating a round hole in a large lump of iron isn't a task that humans can complete by hand. Thus, in the long time that it took for metalworking tools such as lathes to become more advanced, bronze was often used because it remained a robust material even after going through the casting process.

As for guns, which are basically miniature cannons, those were always made from iron. In their case, it was possible because a cylindrical rod with the same diameter as the bullets could be made. After that, a thin plate—made by heating and hammering the iron—could be wrapped around it before joining it at the seam to create a gun barrel. It was generally understood at the time that this sort of tempered iron would be the best material for a cannon too, but the method for making cannons only worked with bronze.

After technological breakthroughs from various people, several discoveries and inventions came along to alleviate these issues, and cannons went from being made from bronze to iron, resulting in an improvement in weaponry.

Looking at it in this way, it's clear that war is part of humanity's technological history.

Iron was discovered, people learned its properties, technology improved, and

an obvious material for use in cannons presented itself. That led to the material being gradually introduced into more complex devices, such as internal combustion engines.

In the days when weapons like guns and simple bayonets were used to fight battles, anyone looking to wage war only really needed iron ore, coal, lead, and gunpowder. But by the time of World War II, war demanded more than just iron. Tanks began to make use of duralumin, which includes aluminum and copper, and various additives were introduced into the iron used in guns and cannons to improve the material's properties.

This meant that war couldn't be fought with just technological advancements. No matter how progressive it might have been, iron couldn't be used as a substitute for materials like aluminum and rubber, and the same still applies in modern day. As technology improves, it becomes impossible to manufacture high performance weapons outside of an environment where a wide variety of materials is obtainable.

Resources, meanwhile, are dispersed across the world, making it impossible to obtain everything from the territory of a single nation. Naturally, the side that can dominate the seas and skies has an advantage, because they can obtain resources from across the world.

Take the Tiger I, for example. This heavy tank was introduced with much fanfare by Nazi Germany at the end of the war. (It was also used by a girl from Kuromorimine Girls' Academy, so it's a well-known tank with many fans.) The tank's highest-quality armor, which included nickel, was used at the front of the tank only. The other three sides (five sides, if you include the top and bottom) made use of armor that lacked nickel for the sake of reducing material costs. As the performance of the armoring decreases, it has to be made thicker to compensate. That, in turn, increases the weight and reduces the tank's speed. A bigger engine is then needed to compensate for the reduced speed. Naturally, these effects don't just apply to the armoring of a tank; they apply to everything, from small guns, to the armor plates on machine guns, and even the helmets worn by ordinary soldiers.

If there's a shortage of resources, then no matter how advanced technology becomes, engineers and scientists won't be able to come up with ways to make

weapons that are superior to those used by the enemy.

I love thinking about this sort of thing, so gaining technological superiority in war was something I wanted to make part of the story. Going back to what I was originally saying, though—as I was writing it into the story, it kept growing like stacked layers of pie dough, which made the story grow very long. I think it's a bad habit of mine.

I've still got afterword space left, so I'll fill it with a story about something that happened long ago.

It's a story about me riding a plane to America (obviously, this was before coronavirus).

The plane was departing from Narita for Los Angeles, so I remember there were a lot of Japanese passengers.

I'd boarded the plane along with someone else for the sake of some unusual work in America, and I was nervous because I was the only one between us who spoke English. My English wasn't all that great, so despite accepting the task (or more like having it forced on me), I was very worried about how we'd cope in America.

Six hours after we'd taken off from Narita, it was time for the cabin's lights to be turned out.

We were sitting in economy class where many passengers, seemingly unable to sleep, were turning on their own lights. It was one of those planes where each seat had its own personal screen, so I suspect many of the people were watching movies or TV shows.

There was a constant whirring sound from the engines while tens, if not hundreds, of people packed into a small space were trying to kill time without making any noise. It's quite a unique environment, isn't it?

Suddenly, there was a loud thud. I'd reclined my chair a little and closed my eyes, but that instantly woke me up.

A man's voice was heard throughout the cabin. "Someone passed out! Somebody! Call for help!"

Oh, I'm about to run out of space. I hate to leave off there, but I'd like to continue in the next volume. I hope I get the chance to continue.

The Conqueror from
a Dying Kingdom

5



“Everyone! Sorry for making you worry, and thank you for your hard work defending the camp in our absence!”

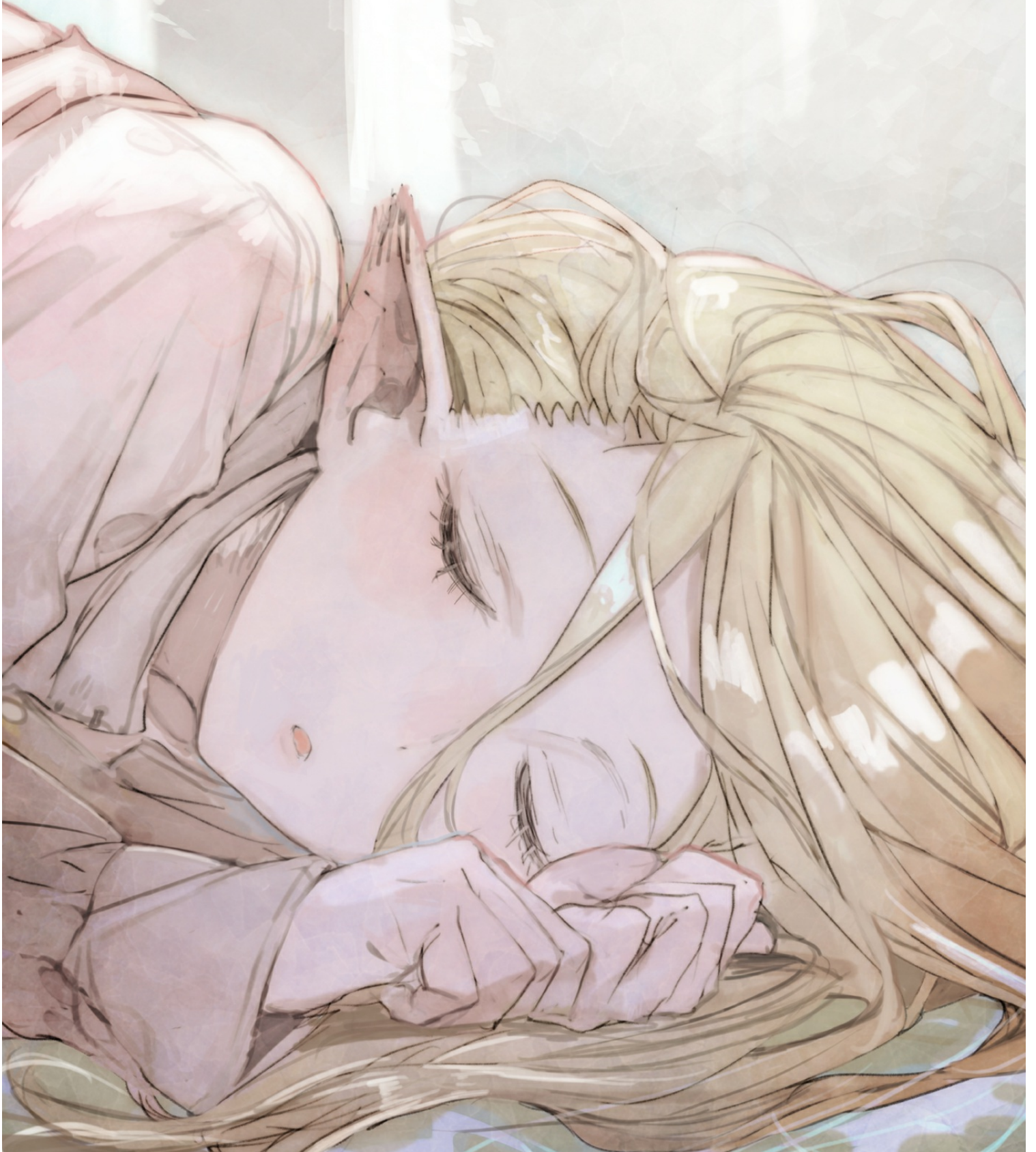
CAROL

YURI

The face of every single soldier trembled with emotion as they listened. There was no one who could’ve taken Carol’s place.



I looked to my side and saw Carol.
Her face was so beautiful that
it fascinated me.



Bonus Short Stories

Sham's Questions

That day, I'd been called in to the math lecturer's office.

I wouldn't go so far as to call this man, who'd recently entered his fifties, an outstanding genius, but he certainly was in possession of an impressive intellect and a love and passion for math.

"May I ask why you called for me?"

"It's about the next Advanced Mathematics III exam."

"Yes?"

"I wondered if you could make the questions for me."

"I'd rather not," I answered instantly, but I bowed my head as I attempted to turn down his stupid request. "Isn't that your job, Sir? I'd rather not go through all that trouble."

"Hold on. How about this?" The lecturer asked, placing two gold coins down on the desk.

Huh...? Gold coins?

"Two of them? That's a generous payment."

"Not at all. It took me a whole week to think of the questions last year, and this is about a week's worth of my pay."

"I see."

"How about it?"

"Very well. I accept."

If I was being paid, then it was like a job. I didn't really need the money, but the idea of doing something in return for payment from someone who wasn't a family member was an attractive prospect. Lilly was always doing that sort of

thing, while I just lived on my allowance. Maybe some part of me felt guilty over it.

“Here are the past questions from last year. The scope is the same. Please keep the difficulty about equal. However...” The lecturer’s voice changed as he attempted to sound impressive. “Make the final question as difficult as you like. I want to see something devious and original.”



The next day, I went back to the math lecturer and gave him a sheet of paper.

“Here it is.”

He cast his eyes over the questions I’d made. “Hmm...”

He probably wasn’t solving them. Someone as knowledgeable as him would know the method of solution at glance, and that was enough to gauge their difficulty.

I knew better than to make a collection of overly tricky questions, so they should’ve all been about right. The first one was simple, but they got progressively harder. The final question consisted of two parts, the first being fairly difficult, and the second being simple but devious.

“Hm...” The lecturer stared at the devious question. “There are three sets of cards numbered one to seven, which gives twenty-one cards in total. A dealer shuffles the cards well, then gives you a card face down. After shuffling again, he draws two cards and places them face up. Both of the face up cards are numbered with a one. What’s the probability that the face down card is also a one?”

This sort of twenty-one-card deck was normally used for a game called fourteen (normally played by gamblers), so the setup would be familiar to many.

“So after the students are tired out by all the other questions, they’ll reach this... Has anyone ever told you that you’re sadistic?”

“But they can answer it based on intuition, can’t they?”

Most people would simply give the answer as one in seven. Other people

would first subtract the two from twenty one and give an answer of one in nineteen. Neither answer required a difficult calculation. A few seconds would be enough for them to give the answer. It was just a question of which they chose.

“The answer’s...one in nineteen, isn’t it?” the lecturer said.

“Yes.”

“And how would you explain that to me if I were a student?”

I hadn’t written any explanations to go with the questions. I’d thought they were all obvious enough.

“The part where the first card is placed face down is what will trick people. There’s nothing particularly special about that card compared to the other twenty—it’s like any other mixed in with the deck. Even without an understanding of posterior probability, it should be an easy problem to solve, right? If you take the face up card and put it back with the rest of the deck, then the answer is obvious to anyone.”

“Okay. It’s a good question when you put it that way.”

“Isn’t it?”

I felt a little proud at having come up with a question that could test someone’s intuition so quickly.

“I suppose I’ll be able to leave all the questions to you from now on.”

“I refuse.”

The request was so unreasonable that I declined it bluntly. I already had enough money, and while this was a good way to make a little extra, I didn’t want to keep doing it.

“Then why don’t you give a lecture some time?”

That suggestion came as a surprise.

“Perhaps I will if I’m ever in need of money, but I’ve never been in that situation. I’m sorry.”

I was from a rich family, and my cousin Yuri had wealth of his own. I couldn’t

imagine money ever being a problem. Maybe someday I'd want to spend so much money setting up a research facility that I bled the national treasury dry, but a lecturer's salary would be insignificant in that case regardless.

"I see... Well, come to me if you ever change your mind."

"Okay."

I got up from my chair and left his office.

Carol and Sham

As Carol was tackling problems in an empty classroom of the academy, a voice—soft like the sound of small bells—called to her.

"Carol?"

Carol turned and saw Yuri's younger cousin, Sham Ho.

"Oh, it's you Sham."

"Is that school work?"

"Yeah. The test problems were really tough... I just can't understand them."

"That looks like Advanced Mathematics III. Do you like math?"

Advanced Mathematics III wasn't a compulsory course, so Carol hadn't needed to take it.

"No, I struggle with it."

"Then why'd you take it?"

"I had space in my timetable, and I figured I'd better work hard at the things I'm bad at. I hate to think I'll always be bad at math."

"What?!" Sham looked at Carol like she couldn't believe her eyes. "That's like me going out of my way to take etiquette and Ancient Shanish courses. I've never even considered it. You're really special, Carol."

"No, you're not taking those courses because you won't need them. But I think I *will* need math. I've got a feeling it'll be useful someday."

"It's still impressive—choosing your weakest subjects like that, I mean."

“Maybe.”

“But what part don’t you understand?”

“Oh, you’re good at math, aren’t you, Sham?”

“I was the one who came up with the questions.”

“Huh?” Carol looked at Sham in surprise.

“The lecturer had me do it like a part-time job, so I know all the answers.”

“Oh, um... Then maybe you can explain this one to me.”



“Ah, I see you’re struggling with the concept of infinity, Carol.”

“Hmm, yeah, that’s what it is.”

Carol was having trouble understanding how 0.999... could be equal to 1. Putting an equal sign between the two values just didn’t seem right to her.

“Well, 0.333... is a recurring decimal value equivalent to $\frac{1}{3}$, isn’t it? So if we multiply $\frac{1}{3}$ by 3, the answer is 0.999... and it’s also 1. I’m sure you’ve been taught that.”

“Well, I know that, but...”

“I’m guessing the problem you’re having is no different from defining this building as X and then doing this.” Sham scratched the desk with her fingernail. “It’s a tiny change, but strictly speaking, it still should mean that X is no longer the same X. Is that what you’re thinking?”

“I guess so.”

Scratching the desk with a fingernail was a tiny change. Saying the state was still equal afterward was like ignoring that tiny discrepancy.

“You’re right. But when the decimal recurs to infinity, there isn’t even a tiny change like this, so it’s still X. Let’s see... The same thing happens when a horse overtakes a person. Maybe that’ll be easier to understand.”

“Huh?”

“A person is walking with a horse following after him. Suppose the two are

one meter apart.” Sham drew a simple diagram on some paper to explain, then continued, “When the horse reaches the position where the person was standing, he’ll have moved further forward. If we keep repeating this process, the person will once again move further ahead as the horse reaches their new position. This means that the horse can approach the person until the two are infinitely close, but one won’t ever overtake the other.”

“Umm... Okay.” Carol was a little mystified. She understood the idea, but it didn’t fit with her everyday experiences.

“But in reality, the horse can overtake the human easily,” Sham continued. “That’s because a horse approaching until it’s infinitely close is conceptually the same as reducing the distance to zero. It’s completely different to making a tiny modification to this building. There’s no discrepancy from zero at all, even in the strictest terms.”

“I see...” Carol didn’t immediately grasp the idea, but she felt the understanding was gradually coming to her.

“It’s not something you experience in ordinary life, but work with math often enough and it’ll become familiar.”

“Maybe you’re right. Yeah, I think I’m starting to get it. Thanks for the help.”

“Not at all. You’ve been looking out for me as my patron this entire time, haven’t you? You can always count on me for little things like this.” After she’d spoken, Sham gave Carol a slightly exaggerated bow.

Lilly’s Weight Loss

Lilly was out running in her workout clothes that day.

“Haah, haah, haah.” She breathed rhythmically as she continued running.

Beside her, Sham had some advice. “That’s no good. You’ve got to maintain your form, or you’ll get tired.”

Sham was running alongside Lilly, moving her thin body with perfect rhythm. Neither of them exercised regularly, yet the difference between them was huge.

“Haah, haah, I...can’t,” Lilly panted.

“Then let’s stop once we reach that point.” Sham calmly said, pointing to a grove of trees way up ahead. “We’ll rest there.”

“Haah, haah, it’s too...far!”

“You can do it. Keep going.”

Once they’d reached the trees, Lilly put her hands to her knees and gasped for air. “Haah, haah, I’m dyin’.”

Despite how cold it was, Lilly was sweating heavily.

“Here. You can use this to wipe yourself.” Sham smiled as she handed Lilly a handkerchief.

“Haah. How come...you’re not beat?”

“You wouldn’t think so just by looking at me, but I exercise more than you do.”

“Haah, haah, no you...don’t.”

“I get a little extra every day because I have to climb in and out of that top bunk.”

Lilly realized it was a joke, but didn’t feel like offering a comeback.

Sham gave a more serious response. “Exercise requires coordination between the respiratory organs you use to breathe, the circulatory organs that circulate your blood, and your muscles. If you want a reason, then maybe it’s because my low weight puts less strain on my muscles. Plus, I might’ve been born with a higher lung capacity. I never give my heart a workout, so that does hurt a little.”

“Haah, haah...”

“There’s probably something that becomes the bottleneck while you’re running. Maybe it’s your legs or your heart. Whatever it is, you have to come to a stop when it’s pushed to its limit. It’s quite interesting to think about.”

“Haah, haah. This ain’t...interestin’.”

“Well sure it is. You are interested in losing weight, aren’t you?”

“Haah, haah, haah...”

It felt a little like a taunt, but Lilly couldn’t deny it.

“Looks like you’ve got your breath back. We can take it slow, but let’s walk a little.”

When the pair entered the forest, they found a small hut.

“What’s this...?” Lilly asked. “Looks kinda ominous.”

There was a rope hanging from a thick branch with a loop at the bottom. At a glance, it looked like it was set up to hang someone. However, the loop at the end wasn’t wide enough to go over someone’s head; it was only just big enough to slide over someone’s wrist.

“Carol told me about this,” Sham said. “It’s used for working out your upper body.”

“How’s it used?”

“Like this.”

With no hesitation, Sham jumped up and grabbed the loop. “Apparently, you climb it.”

Sham gripped the rope and used the strength in her arms to pull herself up. She rose higher and higher as she put one hand over the other. After she’d done that three times, she’d used up all her strength and dropped down to the ground. “Whoa... That’s tougher than it looks.”

The rope was unusually thick and looked unlikely to break. There were also thick knots along its length that made it easy to grip.

“All right... I’m gonna try,” Lilly said.

She braced herself, then grabbed the loop with both hands. Sham was so short that she’d had to jump to reach it, but Lilly just had to stretch a little.

She braced herself, then pulled. “Ngh!”

Lilly’s body didn’t move at all. She couldn’t lift her own weight.

“Huh?”

This doesn't make sense. Sham climbed it so easily. I must be doin' it wrong somehow.

Lilly tried jumping and gripping the rope higher up. "Mgh!"

Unfortunately, she couldn't hold on to the rope to support her own weight, so she fell back to the ground.

Seriously?

"You really can't do it, Lilly? What'll you do if you're ever hanging from a cliff? You won't be able to climb back up."

This time Lilly had a comeback. "Nothin' like that'll never happen."

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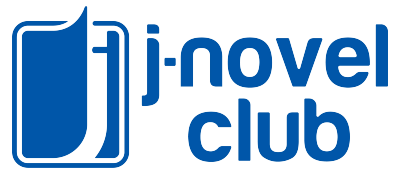
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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 5

by Fudeorca

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2023

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